

"Women, health, work": 4th World Congress in New Delhi

The 4th World Congress on "Women, health, work" was held in New Delhi in November 2005. It was the latest in a sequence begun in Barcelona (1996), and carried on in Rio de Janeiro (1999) and Stockholm (2002). The New Delhi Congress brought together over 700 mostly women participants from 61 countries: scientists from a range of occupational health fields, union activists, members of feminist groups and networks campaigning for health, the environment, social/employment laws and equality. Bringing together such a wide variety of experiences enabled shared concerns to be identified as well as new possibilities for working together on research and practical solidarity schemes.

In recent years, India has turned itself into a manufacturing powerhouse. But output growth has not closed the gaping social equality divides. Indian women still have to work a double day for what is usually a pittance. Modern forms of work-related oppression born out of globalization are compounded by longer-established forms related to the patriarchal family and caste system. Presentations by Indian delegates also revealed vigorous active opposition to all these forms of oppression.

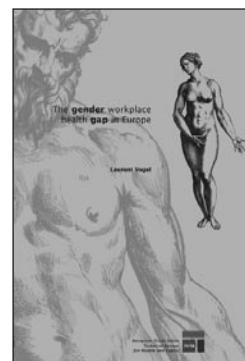
The Congress attempted to work out a gender perspective on health at work. The mine of information it turned up cannot possibly be summed up in a few lines, but two things deserve particular mention:

- The need for women's work to be recognized is a problem in all countries. In the "visible" economic sphere, many skills and abilities possessed by women are discounted in order to justify low pay. The situation is worse still in the family economic sphere, where the bulk of unpaid work is done by women. Between the two lies a vast grey area of work in the informal sphere, in particular home work, where the exploitation of female labour is particularly brutal.
- The gender dimension can only be mainstreamed in health at work if women workers' voices are heard. The only way to reverse old-established male work-centred approaches to health at work is through participatory research tied to labour action.

The experience of the 4th Congress showed the importance of building up a world network on women's occupational health. European trade unions made a regrettably poor showing. And while having the proceedings conducted only in English was certainly an obstacle, a sizeable trade union contingent from Latin American countries and Quebec showed that it was not an insurmountable one. The next Congress is scheduled for 2008 in Mexico.

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More information about the
4th World Congress:
www.swl-delhi.org/wwh



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