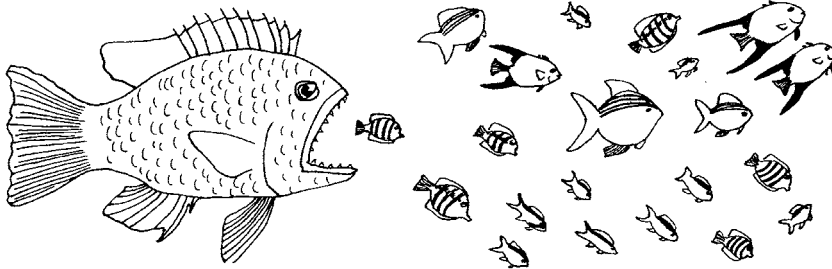
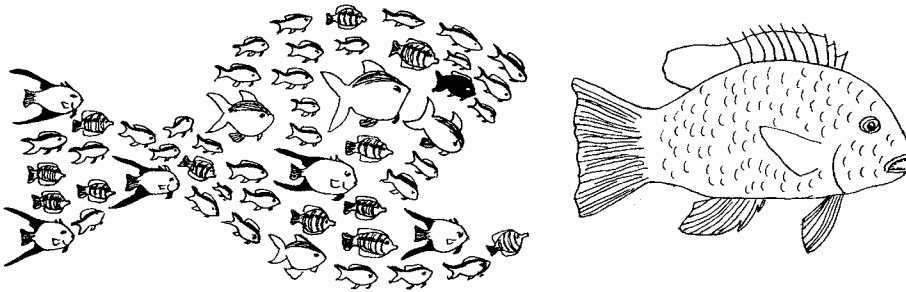


21

Discrimination



Divided we lose.



United we win!

All workers deserve respect, a healthy and safe job, and a living wage. No matter what our differences may be, we all should have the same rights. But some people are treated badly because of who they are. Women, migrant workers, people with disabilities, and people of different ethnic or religious backgrounds are often treated in unequal and harmful ways by the government, the law, our bosses and supervisors, and even co-workers and community members.

Focus on finding out what challenges all workers face, especially women workers. The activity on pages 310 to 311 can help you find ways of learning about each other in a respectful way while working towards common goals to improve conditions in the factory. Joining together in a struggle does not mean you all share the same challenges, but it can help build unity and understanding as you tackle the problems you do share.



My boss harasses me every day. Some days he tells me I am pretty. Some days he says I'm dumber than a donkey.



I have 10 years' experience and do good work, but I can't find a job. They say I'm too old, they only hire young people.



Dark-skinned people are loud and dirty! I'm glad the supervisor keeps them where they belong: in the cleaning room!



I can't talk to anyone at work. My co-workers make fun of my accent and my boss says he will fire me if I speak my own language.

Discrimination in the factory

It is no coincidence that most workers in export factories are young women. Because society teaches women to obey and serve men, bosses think they will accept the low salaries and harsh conditions of the factories. They also know that many young women were denied education, so factory work is one of the few opportunities they have. This makes bosses believe that women are less likely to cause “trouble.” The same is true for people who migrate to find work.

Denied better jobs and promotions

Young and women workers get hired for low-skilled jobs with the promise of promotions later. But after they learn the skills necessary to change jobs or become supervisors, bosses might still pay them starting salaries.

Women are usually not promoted, even when they are qualified.

Lower pay

Wages are low in export factories. Yet women, indigenous people and ethnic minorities, workers who migrate, and people with disabilities are usually paid even less.

Wage discrimination means some workers are less able to afford nutritious food, decent housing, health care, and basic services such as clean water. Wage discrimination means they have to work longer and harder to make ends meet, and are exposed to toxics and repetitive movements for longer amounts of time.



What good will it do to organize for a higher minimum wage if, as women, we are not guaranteed equal pay?

Humiliating treatment

Insults and harassment by the boss are intended to make workers feel worthless and fearful and can lead to physical and mental health problems. Women, people who migrate, indigenous people, people with darker skin, and people with disabilities are often treated in ways to make them feel they are more stupid or worth less than other workers. Women are often humiliated and harassed because they are seen as less than men.

When workers' self-esteem is harmed by the discrimination they face at work and in their community, they might feel they have no power to fight against unfair and unhealthy working conditions. However, even when we do not think so, we all have power in one or many parts of our lives (see *We have power, too!* on page 317).

Dangerous jobs

The dirtiest, most dangerous, and lowest-paid jobs in the factory go to workers with the least power in the factory or community, or are given out as punishment to workers involved in organizing to keep them isolated, harass them, and force them to quit. When equipment and tools are not designed to fit women, they can lead to serious health problems caused by poisoning (see pages 269 to 270) and strain and overuse (see chapter 7: Ergonomics). Women who get pregnant should be moved to less difficult, less dangerous jobs, with no reduction in pay. When this does not happen, it puts them and their babies in danger (see chapter 26: Reproductive and sexual health).

Violence

Bosses use violence and the threat of violence to control workers. But often, the workers who are the most discriminated against are the ones that face the worst kinds of violence. Women and migrant workers are targeted most often. The violence inside a factory is often a reflection of the discrimination faced in our communities.



Blaming workers instead of the boss

Millions of people migrate from rural areas of China to work in factories in the big cities. In fact, the Chinese government encourages companies to hire workers from poor regions in China where most of the ethnic minorities live. Bosses know migrants left poverty and hardship in their home towns and are desperate for jobs. Employers take advantage of their desperation and say, “There are others just like you outside the door waiting for a job, so don’t complain or we’ll just fire you and hire someone new.”

Workers who migrate face different hardships than local workers, but inside the factory walls, all are hurt by unfair and unsafe working conditions.

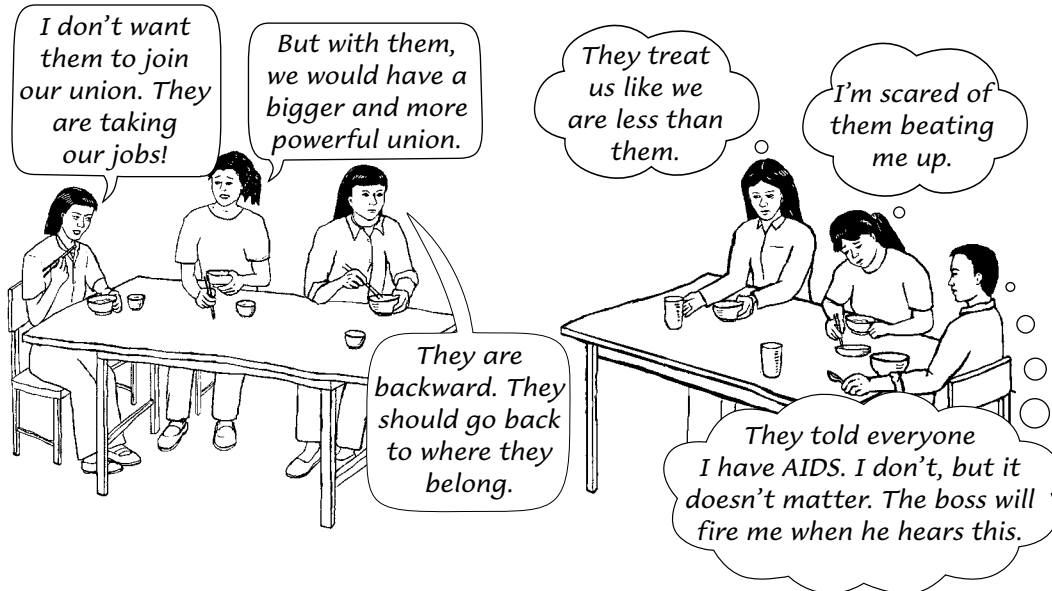
In Guangdong factories, the majority Han group clashed with the Muslim minority Uyghur people. The Han resented the new group for many reasons. When the boss started firing Han workers and replacing them with Uyghur workers, many Hans blamed the Uyghur, instead of blaming the boss. When false rumors about Uyghur men raping Han women began to spread, the Han put all their frustration and anger into fighting Uyghurs. Fights broke out among hundreds of Han and Uyghur workers and riots lasted for hours. Two people were killed. Fights between Han and Uyghur broke out in other communities as well.



In the end, the police had to intervene, arresting and beating many workers. But nothing changed. The workers who were fired were not rehired and the conditions in the factories only got worse for both Han and Uyghur.

Divisions among workers

When society believes in the superiority of one group over others, this carries over into the workplace. Workers with lighter skin may look down on workers who have darker skin. In racist societies everywhere, even the poorest people with lighter skin usually have privileges that darker skinned people do not. People with HIV, a disability, or qualities that make them visibly different are often abused the most.



No representation in the union or worker committees

Unions and groups that support workers should represent and fight for the needs of all workers in the factory. But sometimes unions are led by one group of workers who have more power or privilege than others. They might fight for issues that affect only them and their group or not know (or care to know) about the issues that affect other workers.



Unions are often led by men, even if women are a majority in the factory.



The right to equality



The **UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights** says every person:

- has equal rights and freedoms no matter their race, sex, language, religion, political opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status.
- has the right to work, choose a job freely, fair work conditions, and protection against unemployment with no discrimination.
- has the right to receive equal pay for equal work with no discrimination.
- has the right to fair and adequate pay for their work with no discrimination.
- has the right to form trade unions.

The **UN International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)**:

- prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national or ethnic origin.
- guarantees everyone freedom of movement, freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to peaceful assembly and association.
- gives workers the right to form and join trade unions.
- provides equal access to public health, medical care, and social security, as well as education and training.

The **ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111)** bans discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, or national or ethnic origin in getting a job, type of occupation, and exercise of worker rights. The ILO specifically supports the rights of vulnerable groups including: indigenous and tribal peoples, migrant workers, women workers, and children who work.

The **ILO Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100)** says all male and female workers should receive equal pay for equal work.

The **UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** says:

- Women have the right to job security and job promotion.
- Women have the right to equal access to health and safety protections.
- Women have the right to special protection during pregnancy.
- Employers cannot fire women for being pregnant.

The roles of the UN, ILO, and other international organizations that promote workers' rights are explained in Appendix A.

Discrimination is everybody's problem

It is easy to see the inequality we experience ourselves. It is harder to see how others are hurt by inequalities we do not experience, and to see the ways we discriminate against others. When our organizing challenges unequal access to opportunities, resources, and power in factories, we have to look at the roles that everyone, including ourselves, plays in continuing discrimination.

Activity

Who has the power?

1. In a group, brainstorm who has more power in your factory. Ask participants to consider what qualities people may have, or what positions they may be in, that allow them to use their power to treat others badly. Do not use people's names. Focus on the positions or qualities they have. Write these down on the left side of a board or a large piece of paper under the heading More Power.
2. Then, ask people to think about the qualities people have or positions they are in that give them less power and make them subject to discrimination. Write these down on the right of the previous list, under the heading Less Power. Have people give examples of how these people are discriminated against: what happens, what do people feel, how do others treat them?

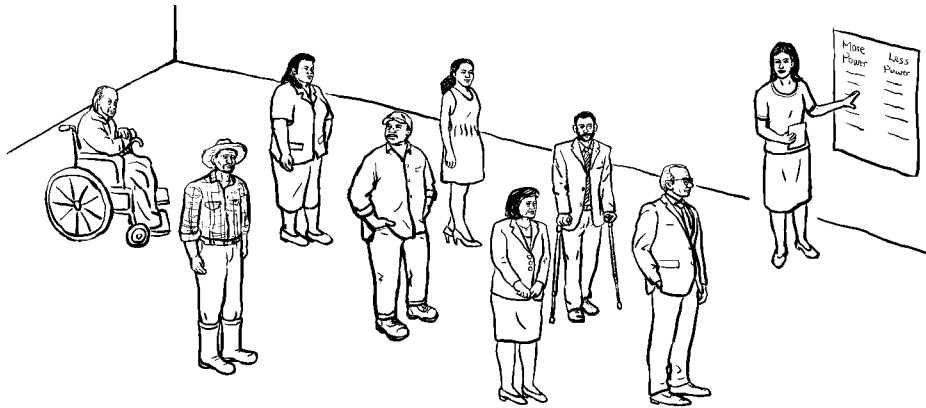
MORE POWER	LESS POWER
Owner	Supervisor
Supervisor	Worker
Contract worker	Temporary worker
Men	Women
Operators	Cleaners
Young	Old
Native-born	Migrant
Lighter skin	Darker skin
Majority	Minority
Not married and no babies	Married with a family
Educated	No education

(continued)

Activity

Who has the power? *(continued)*

3. Ask about how power is used in the factory: do people with more power use it to help or harm others in the factory?
4. Assign each person in the group a position and a few qualities from the More Power and the Less Power columns. Make sure to assign equal numbers of roles from each column and to assign them randomly.
5. Now ask people to stand up and stand side by side. Make sure there is enough room for people to move forward and backward.
6. Using any of the qualities or positions in the More Power list, say, "Take a step forward if you are a man," or "Take a step forward if you are a worker with a contract." Then say, "Take a step backward if you are a woman," or "Take a step backward if you are a temporary worker," using the list in the Less Power column. Continue alternating between the 2 lists until everyone has taken several steps and people can see they are in different places.



7. Ask people to tell the group what mix of qualities and positions they have that contributed to their place in the power march.
8. Have a prize or prizes prepared (a piece of fruit or other snack), but give it first to the people who "lost" the power march, saying, "Why should the people with power always win?" Then give a snack to everyone.
9. End the activity by discussing what has to change to make work and power in the factory more equal. What should people in different roles do differently? You can also do the activity on page 317.

I can share my prize.



Improve women's status in the community and at work

Discrimination against women at home and in the community is brought, often without thinking, by workers and management into the factory and strengthens discrimination in the workplace. But by working to set rules in the workplace that prohibit discrimination, attitudes about what women can and cannot do might begin changing. These changes might be brought out of the factory and into the community as well. It's worth trying, and the activities in this chapter can help you make these changes.

The second shift

Before and after long days and nights in the factory, many women workers continue working: women cook, clean, and care for their families. Working outside the home and then coming home to more work means that women work 2 jobs, one of which is not paid enough and the other is not paid at all!

Overworked in the factory and at home, a woman's double work often gives her double stress. The demands of meeting family emotional and caregiving needs, combined with the economic demands of providing for the family through factory work, make many women's lives seem like assembly lines that move too fast and have unachievable production quotas. What is produced with great efficiency is unhappiness and stress, which can cause physical, mental, and emotional health problems. See chapter 27: Stress and mental health.

With all her family and work duties, it is hard for a working woman to find the time to prepare healthy meals, to care for her own needs, and to rest, much less to participate in community, women's, or workers' groups.

Support women to join organizing efforts

Because many women work a second shift and because factory areas are often dangerous, women face barriers getting involved in worker movements. Your group can make worker events more welcome to all if it:

- holds meetings near where workers live. Make sure safe transportation is available to get there and get home.
- calls meetings for times that do not conflict with women's work at home. Women have many time-consuming home duties such as washing, cooking, and gathering water, fuel, and food. Many women care for children, parents, or other family members.
- provides childcare at meetings. If you can, also offer food.
- creates gender policies to guide the work of the union. Set goals for the number of women in union offices and launch programs to increase the activity of women in the union.

Activity

What do you do in a day?

When women workers have to spend all their free hours doing all the work at home, they have no time to rest, take care of their needs, eat well, have fun, participate in the community, or join organizing campaigns.

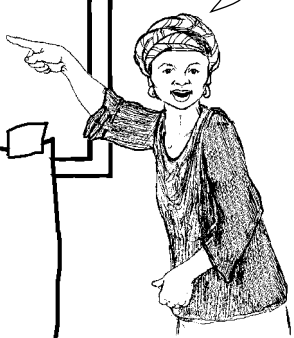
This activity helps make visible all the duties that women have at work and at home.

1. Ask the group about all their duties and responsibilities during the day. On the board, write women's answers on one side and men's on the other.
2. How do they compare? What kind of responsibilities does one group have that the other does not? Why do you think that is the case?

MEN	WOMEN
Sleep	Sleep
Wake up	Feed the children
Go to work	Take them to school
Union meeting	Make all meals
Visit mother	Wash clothes
Eat	Iron clothes
	Make the beds

Take mom to clinic
Sweep and mop
Wash dishes
Go to work
Eat

If men share family responsibilities, men and women can both have some time to do things they like.



3. Ask each group to say what things they like or would like to do during the day. They can list as many as will fit on their side of the board. Ask: Do they have time to do the things they like?
4. Discuss how men and women can share some of the work involved in taking care of the home and children more equally.



If I cook dinner once a week, my wife can attend a weeknight workshop at the union.

Include all people in organizing efforts

Unions, health and safety committees, and other worker groups should represent and fight for the needs of all workers in the factory, focusing particularly on the groups that have usually had less power, such as women.

One way in which unions can ensure that the voices of those most oppressed are heard and represented is to make sure that their leadership includes people from those groups. Representation, however, does not mean that women's voices will be heard. Male leaders need to make a commitment to women's equality too.



Our factories, like our communities, are now very diverse, so why shouldn't the union be diverse too? Fighting for equality in the union is just a small step, but when we achieve it, we open the doors for solidarity, unity, and a better life for all in our communities.

Organize activities with a group or union to talk about the ways in which gender affects women and men differently. Some women's groups organize to challenge discrimination by sharing information about women's rights through workshops and meetings, posters, flyers, newsletters, and even through songs and theater.

Gender issues for unions to bargain with the employer

- No sexual harassment
- No violence against women
- Equal pay for equal work
- Access to the same jobs – no sex discrimination in the workplace
- Safe transportation to and from the factory
- Parental rights and childcare facilities, including time during the day for breastfeeding
- No forced pregnancy tests or firing workers who become pregnant
- Flexible work hours to allow workers to care for family members

Use the law to fight against discrimination

Most governments have laws that ban discrimination at work and in the community. If you decide to report discrimination — to your boss, the brands your factory is producing for, the government, or a human rights group in your community — you should:

Have as much information as possible about the incident or incidents of discrimination. Write or ask someone to help you write the facts of what happened, including the date, time, location, names of witnesses, and other details. If it happens often, keep a running list. It will also help to record what was said to you. Use a cell phone to take videos of incidents.

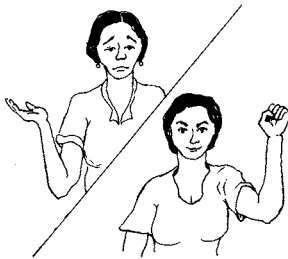
Connect with other workers who might be experiencing discrimination. Working with groups that have something in common, for example, having women organizers talk with women workers, might make people more comfortable speaking about the discrimination they face. Add their experiences to a log of discrimination events in your factory, but do not reveal the names of workers unless they give their permission. Even if you decide not to report discrimination to your boss or government officials now, this information can be helpful in organizing workers or showing how long such situations have been occurring if things get worse.

Seek support from workers, human rights, women's rights, or other community groups. Discrimination affects people in many parts of their lives. NGOs in your community might already be organizing to fight against discrimination. They can help you decide what strategy might work best for you and the workers in your factory.



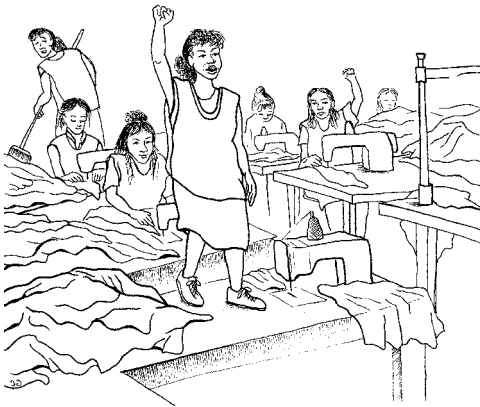
Find your power

The discrimination workers face at the factory and in the community can make them feel they do not deserve to be treated well — to earn a living wage, to be protected against dangerous work, to have decent benefits. They are being told, “just be glad you have a job.” Self-esteem is further harmed when these ideas are repeated by co-workers, especially those who do not face all the same challenges. Sometimes we feel we have no power to fight against unfair and unhealthy working conditions. However, even when we do not think so, we all have power in some parts of our lives. We have:



Power within ourselves to hope and fight for a better future and to recognize and believe in ourselves.

Power with other workers. Even though we are different, we face many of the same challenges in the workplace. Working with other workers allows you to share the responsibility (and risk) of organizing, but it also allows you to reach for bigger goals!

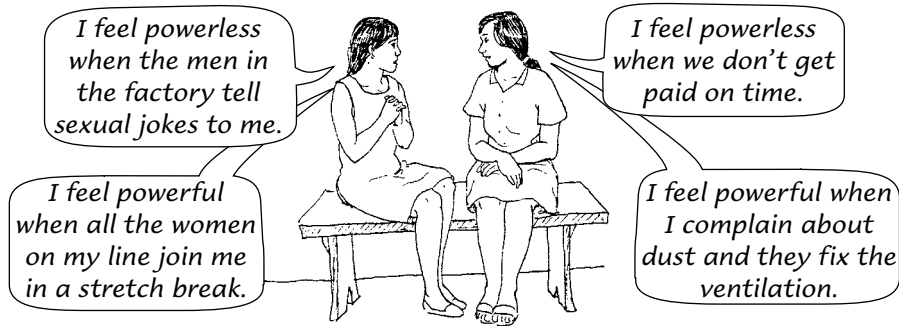


Power to take action and change our circumstances. Whether we work with a group of people or not, nobody can take away our power to stand up for our rights.

Activity

We have power, too!

1. Break the group into pairs. Ask each person to tell the other about an event or experience in which they felt powerless. Then ask them to tell about an experience that made them feel powerful or respected.



2. Bring the group back together, and ask one person from each pair to tell one of the stories about feeling powerful or respected. Use a large piece of paper to make a list of the things that make people feel powerful.

3. Then ask one person from each pair to tell one of the stories about feeling powerless. Discuss each story.

- What could you do or say to make a person feel supported in this situation?
- What could we do as a group to support that worker?
- What could we do to change the situation?

What makes you feel powerful?

- Learning about my rights
- Creating a plan for difficult situations
- Meetings
- Working with the community
- Learning to become a leader
- Organizing a group of workers
- Talking to workers from other factories
- Singing together

4. Add people's ideas of what makes people feel powerful to the list.

5. Conclude by discussing how we can include these ideas in our organizing and the ways we relate to each other.



They divide and rule; we unite and conquer!

Our small factory in Los Angeles, USA, had only 20 workers but we came from 5 different countries and spoke 5 different languages. We could not talk to each other, not even about what was happening at work. Another problem was that many of us were working without legal working papers. When anyone complained about getting paid for only 35 hours when we worked 50, the owner would threaten us with deportation. There was also a lot of racial tension. We didn't know much about each other and when the boss would tell us that a person from one group worked less than others, it was easy to blame all the people from that group. It was hard to organize.

An NGO in our community reached out to many factories that had the same kind of problem. They had materials in many languages and brought organizers who spoke our languages to the meetings. They helped us talk to one another. After hearing workers from all the different ethnic groups talk about their experiences and about how the boss was trying to divide us, we realized we needed to work together instead of against one another.

It took many months to learn to trust each other and to build up the power within our group. With the help of the worker organization, we learned that even workers without legal papers have the right to organize and demand fair pay. Finally, one day we went on strike. The boss was so surprised! He never thought we would work together. It wasn't an easy battle and many times the boss's men would come to our homes and communities and try to provoke hate among the different groups. But we knew we had to stand together in order to change conditions in our factory.

