

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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Spotlight on Irina Livkovich (PIT.Ua Ukraine, Decisions for Life)

"More young women can be leaders and, thanks to this project, dare to do what they want to."

Irina Livkovich used to be an economist but is now the head of the women's committee of PIT.Ua, a union for IT people in Ukraine. The Women's Committee was created under the Decisions for Life project, and as a direct result its mission is more or less the same as the campaign mission. The Decisions for Life campaign (<http://www.ituc-csi.org/decisions-for-life.html?lang=en>) is running in more than 12 countries all over the world - from Brazil in the west to Indonesia in the east. The target of the campaign is to organise young women and make them aware of their rights at work.

What has the Decisions for Life campaign been doing in Ukraine?

-We have organized lots of different events: focus groups and seminars, and we are very focused now on leadership for women. Just a few weeks after this Decisions for Life conference in Amsterdam, we are organising a big national conference on women and leadership in Ukraine.

We have invited female politicians, top managers and women's organisations and women's committees from the unions. As few as seven percent of the parliamentarians are women in Ukraine, and there are only ten percent women in the top leadership in the business companies.

-A young participant from one of our events is now a participant in this very conference in Amsterdam. She now runs the campaigns program, the "Helping Hand" website. She is a trained psychologist, and she answers people's questions online. They can choose to ask questions anonymously or openly. On the website there are also articles about women's rights, news, etc.

Can you give us some concrete examples of what you have been doing as part of the Decisions for Life campaign?

-We have arranged a national essay contest where young women from all the regions have sent in texts about their visions for gender equality and conditions at work for example. We have decided to continue to do this contest every year. We think it can be a way of attracting young women leaders.

-Another example is that two of the girls participating in this contest started an English-speaking club afterwards. They discuss gender issues, but they can also practice their English. Both girls are educated English teachers, but none of them can afford to work as teachers, since the salary is so low. Now they work as office managers. But they are very happy they have found a way to teach English anyhow.

-Another girl was dreaming of working as a journalist, and now she writes articles on our websites.

What is the situation for young workers in Ukraine?

- Now with the financial crisis all over the world, the conditions for young workers leaves a lot to be desired in Ukraine. There are a lot of people trying to realize themselves, and they need help and somebody to show them in the right direction. We need to give them advice on how to make decisions. Of course with the glass ceiling being a big problem, women can reach the middle but not the top.

- I hope more girls can be leaders and that this project can help women to be confident and dare to do what they want. Young people especially lack dignity in Ukraine. Young women are in need of flexible working hours so they can combine work and life.

- People are afraid of being members in unions in our country. Our people have been treated badly for so many years, and now they don't have trust anymore in anyone. They can't trust that if they pay a membership fee, they will actually get the help they need when they need it. People don't want to be responsible for their own lives! I think that the fact that Decisions for Life is an international campaign can help us a lot - people from all over the world are fighting for the same thing, and we are not alone in this fight.

What is the status for women in Ukraine?

- Men don't respect women in Ukraine. We have almost ideal legislation on both women and labour rights (maternity leave, etc.), but employers don't follow these laws and always break them!

- A year ago I wrote an open letter from the PIT.Ua to the Prime Minister of Ukraine (as part of the Decisions for Life campaign), and we asked for decent working conditions for women. Unfortunately he didn't reply. But in a public speech I heard the President say that "Women belong in the kitchen". Women reacted of course more strongly to this than the men in Ukraine, and unfortunately we are a very traditional country when it comes to gender equality.

What will you take with you from this conference in Amsterdam?

-There are a lot of things I will take with me from this conference! Mainly good ideas from the other women that I will try and make use of also in Ukraine. I already have five concrete ideas! I will share them with you:

1. Journalists in our country don't want to get in touch with unions. They basically don't write about anything if they are not paid to do so. So my idea is that I must get personal. I will try and make some friends amongst the journalists covering the gender issues, and then I will try and use them for the issues we are working on.
2. I will get in touch with the governmental department that is responsible for family and maternity questions. Maybe they could help us with practical issues such as getting meeting rooms for our workshops, etc. Otherwise we need to pay for that.
3. Every trade union in the Ukrainian part of the campaign has its own website. We need to try and network and start sharing more information and contacts with each other. Together we can make an effort to show people that they don't need to be afraid of trade unions.
4. The fourth idea is a practical idea on an event. I was very touched by the story the Azerbaijani trade union leader told us - how he went into prisons and talked to women

prisoners; he told them about trade unions and about their future opportunities in order to encourage them to make their own decisions in life.

5. And fifth is another story I was inspired by, that of the South African girl who suffered from sexual harassment from a taxi driver one night when she was taking a taxi home. She called the police and told the story, and they just told her: "this is your own fault because you were wearing a miniskirt". She then told some of her girlfriends, and they all went outside the taxi company wearing miniskirts and having banners and made a mini-manifestation. They got a lot of support and visibility for this action.

Interview by Kristin Blom

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