

Report on  
**SEMINAR ON EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL**

**Launch of Gender Equality Campaigns**

**15-18 February 2024**

**Title: Redefining Gender, Equality, and Inclusivity - South Asian Perspectives on Gender and Rights**



**SUMMARY**

Realising the importance of redefining gender, equality, and inclusivity in South Asia necessitates a holistic approach that acknowledges and uplifts all individuals, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, SARTUC organised a seminar, in collaboration with South Asia Gender Platform (SAGP) and Mondiaal FNV, organised a seminar and campaign launch on “*Redefining Gender, Equality, and Inclusivity - South Asian Perspectives on Gender and Rights*” at Kathmandu, Nepal on 15-18 February 2024. By addressing historical legacies, confronting current challenges, and integrating the LGBTQ+ community into the conversation, South Asian societies can work towards creating a more equitable and harmonious future for all. 21 participants, among which 13 women, 5 men and 3 others (LGBTIQ+ Community) attended the Seminar on Equal Opportunities for All, to launch the Gender Equality Campaigns in Kathmandu, Nepal. The seminar was organised to coincide with the World Social Forum, which was held in Kathmandu from 15 – 19 February 2024. A total of 21 participants from Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal,

Pakistan and Sri Lanka participated in the seminar. Importantly, the SARTUC Women's Committee members were engaged and involved in the seminar and campaign where they discussed redefining gender, equality, and inclusivity from the perspective of workers in the world of work.

## **BACKGROUND**

Seminar on Equal Opportunities for All and the Launch of Gender Equality Campaigns in Kathmandu provided a favourable space for trade unions to explore and discuss the issues of gender, equality, and inclusivity from the South Asian perspectives. The seminar aimed to shed light on gender and rights in the context of South Asian countries. Through the campaigns, interactions, and inclusive dialogue from South Asian gender experts and trade union women leaders, we aim to redefine gender, equality, and inclusivity with context to the region. Importantly, the seminar and campaign launching will uphold gender rights at the workplaces in the region.

South Asian nations share a close cultural similarity, despite variations in languages, clothing, and culinary traditions. The deeply rooted patriarchal structure in society has existed for numerous years, laying the foundation for predominantly male-centric cultures. In most South Asian countries, women lack access to education and basic healthcare and are more likely to experience poverty than their male counterparts. Living under strict gender constraints and limitations, women do not have the resources, skill sets, and agency to voice their needs and fight for their rights.

Though we generally talk only about women and men as the main components of the world of work, there is also the significant “other” category of workers comprising the LGBTQI+ who have been conveniently ignored and stigmatized by society. While some countries have recognized them, getting equal rights and dignified recognition has still not happened. Unfortunately, countries in South Asia have stigmatised this community and it is very rare to hear of significant developments related to them. Countries of South Asia need to move forward and recognise this community so that discrimination and stigma can be dispensed with. This community has gone through a lot and now is the time to bring about the quantum change in mindset and instilling empathy into the view that we hold about our own and the other gender, to get them into the mainstream society by recognizing their talents and ensuring “Equal opportunities and Respectful employment for all”.

Furthermore, to create a truly inclusive society, South Asia must redefine not only traditional gender roles but also embrace the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations. Comprehensive education programmes should be designed to promote understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ issues, challenging societal norms that perpetuate discrimination.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE SEMINAR AND CAMPAIGN LAUNCH**

- To provide a comprehensive overview of the existing gender disparities in South Asian countries, considering education, health, and economic opportunities for women and the LGBTQI+ community.
- To campaign for diversifying leadership roles in trade unions to create a positive impact on women's leadership and eliminate violence and harassment in the workplace.
- To explore the strategies to promote gender, equality, and inclusivity in trade union movements as well as in the world of work.
- To establish a roadmap and formulate recommendations and actionable steps to redefine gender, equality, and inclusivity in the region.

### Welcome and Opening Remarks



The event commenced with an opening and welcome address by Bro Laxman Basnet, General Secretary, SARTUC. He highlighted the importance of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in the trade union movement and emphasised the need for collective efforts to end gender-based violence at workplaces in South Asia. Moreover, he highlighted the importance of gender equality in building a more inclusive and progressive trade union movement.

**Bro Laxman Basnet**, General Secretary SARTUC welcomed the Mondiaal FNV officials Sis Wilma Roos, Policy Officer for Asia, Sis Marjian Brunner, Communication Officer, and Bro Prabhu Rajendran who were also present at the Seminar.

**Sis Wilma Roos**, in her opening message, congratulated SARTUC for having taken the initiative to institutionalise gender and shared the experiences of Mondiaal FNV where gender equality is a big issue, particularly in respect of the LGBTQI+ members who have formed the Rainbow Network.

### Introduction and Planning for Seminar and Campaign

After a round of introductions, **Nishi Kapahi**, the Gender Coordinator presented the current scenario in respect of women and gender equality in the South Asian countries where there is a prevalence of patriarchy coupled with a culturally influenced preference for male offspring.

Women face various challenges, including lack of education, basic healthcare, and are more likely to experience poverty than their male counterparts.

Thereafter, she introduced the planning that was done for organising the campaign on Equal Opportunities for All, the posters and materials prepared along with the videos created by the participants were launched and officially released.

### **Issues and Challenges Faced by Participants in Planning and Creating Campaign Materials**

The participants shared the issues and challenges faced by them when they had to create these materials. The general view was the high fear factors:

- i. Women in particular did not want to appear on camera or in photographs to voice their concerns for fear of losing their jobs/assignments and also due to the social stigma. (Pakistan)
- ii. A lot of issues are faced by women but they do not feel comfortable talking about them (Sri Lanka, India)
- iii. Family constrains compel women to keep mum about the atrocities they face and not talk about the abuse, harassment and bullying they face for fear of losing their jobs or the work they get.
- iv. Lack of awareness about how organising or becoming a part of trade union can help workers (Domestic workers). The workers want to organise but are openly reluctant to say so particularly on camera.(contract workers)
- v. Men do not want women to associate with the trade unions or be a part of it. (Pakistan, Maldives, Bangladesh)
- vi. Lots of gender sensitisation required. There is a great need to change the way we think.
- vii. Political in fights taking place in all countries – no benefit to any trade unions
- viii. The members of the LGBTQI group shared their experiences and challenges faced by them in society. In Sri Lanka, the Abhiman Trade Union founded by the Transgender community raised issues about lack of toilets.
- ix. They also raised issues about getting loans from the banks for education or for starting their business. Young children too face issues when they are abandoned by their parents with no provision to provide fostering or adoption facilities.



**Bhoomi Harendran**, the Executive Director of the Abhiman Trade Union from Sri Lanka gave a talk on The Isolated & invisible Gender. An introduction to Transgender community. The talk had a great impact on the participants and many of them shared how this talk was a first time they had got to know the Transgender community.



**The next session** was to clear the perceptions and misconceptions the participants had on the issues of gender. Various statements were discussed by the participants and their views were presented. This session helped clear many misconceptions based on the respective cultures of each country. Some participants were not willing to accept the openness in other cultures while some thought the countries were too conservative and with closed mindsets.

Finally, more information was given on the following days of the World Social Forum and the activities that SARTUC would be participating in.

### **Evaluation**

The seminar closed with an **evaluation of the two days**. Some of the participants felt that this programme:

- i. Had a very good discussion. It gave a platform to think and challenged the participants to brainstorm after returning to their countries. More such discussions are needed.
- ii. This was a big learning experience as it taught a great deal about the 3rd gender.
- iii. It helped change mind sets about gender particularly when we cleared misconceptions.
- iv. It was suggested to do the meetings/seminars in hybrid modes.
- v. It was felt by some participants that there was too much stress on the LGBTQI (who were very vocal during the programme) and it appeared that this was a women vs LGBT programme.

### **Closing Remarks**

In the concluding remarks given by **Bro Laxman Basnet**, General Secretary, SARTUC, stated that SARTUC is trying to bring about awareness and not trying to force participants to change their mind set. Developments and changes are happening everywhere and we have to accept it. He advised the participants to keep an open mind, interact with more people and use the platform of freedom which the union provides to enlighten themselves and their colleagues.

### DAY 3 PANEL DISCUSSION AT WSF 2024

SARTUC organised two Side Events in World Social Forum 2024 (WSF2024Nepal), Kathmandu “Another World is Possible” on 17th February 2024, in collaboration with the International Trade Union Confederation – Asia Pacific (ITUC-AP), Mondiaal FNV, South Asia Gender Platform (SAGP), and Solidarity Center (SC); one of which was a Side Event on Panel Discussion at World Social Forum (WSF) on “Redefining Gender, Equality, and Inclusivity - South Asian Perspectives on Gender and Rights: Addressing Historical Legacies, Confronting Current Challenges, and Integrating the LGBTQI+ into the Conversation”, organised with the collaboration with SAGP and Mondiaal FNV.

The Side Event (panel discussion) highlighted and discussed the challenges faced by women workers, particularly gender equality and women workers’ rights in the region through the



participants.

inclusive dialogue from South Asian trade union leaders and LGBTQI+ activities’. The side event at WSF 2024 was open to all the delegates and participants who attended WSF across the world, thus, the hall was fully occupied with more than 150

The key discussion revolved around gender, equality, and inclusivity in South Asia, and the situation of different genders in the leadership, especially in the context of trade unions in South Asian nations. Additionally, the panellists highlighted best practices, potential solutions, and strategies to deal with the challenges representing their respective countries.

### DAY 4 LABOUR FORUM [Organised by Joint Trade Union Coordination Centre (JTUCC)]

Bro **Harbhajan Singh Siddhu**, President, SARTUC and Bro **Laxman Basnet**, General Secretary, SARTUC provided their remarks to the Labour Forum in WSF 2024 from the SARTUC

perspective. Both of them stated the critical phases of trade unions in South Asia, moreover, workers and trade unions are facing difficult times. The governments in South Asia are working with pro-capital and anti-labour mind-sets, ignoring the conditions of workers, labour rights and labour laws. Moreover, the president of SARTUC highlighted that the workers' rights which have been achieved through the tireless struggle of trade unions are getting under threat in the region. Importantly, the general secretary of SARTUC focused on the implementation of social protection for all without any discrimination and the schemes are vital support for the workers, the poor and the vulnerable. All the SARTUC participants of the seminar were presented at the Labour Forum.



The Joint Trade Union Coordination Centre (JTUCC) serves as a collective platform for Nepal's working class (10 recognised National Trade Union Centres affiliated with it). During the Nepal Labour Forum High-Level Discussions on “Ensuring Labour Rights - Promoting Social Justice,” experts and union representatives addressed emerging challenges in the global labour market and their local impacts. Key topics included the precarious nature of work, increasing informal employment, technological advancements like automation and AI, and their effects on job security and workers' rights. Other issues such as wage disparities, occupational health and safety, gender inequality, exploitation of migrant workers, and climate change's impact on labour were highlighted. Special attention was given to discrimination and wage disparities faced by women and LGBTQI+ workers and the exploitation and denial of rights experienced by migrant and informal workers. The forum stressed the need to manage new technologies to avoid abrupt job losses, advocating for gradual adaptation to safeguard workers' livelihoods.

Despite challenges like undemocratic restrictions and corporate greed leading to inadequate social security and poor working conditions, trade unions remain committed to advocating for justice. The Nepal Labour Forum underscored the need for stronger labour regulations, enhanced social



security measures, and fair labour practices. It called for collective action from governments, employers, trade unions, and civil society to address inequalities, insecurities, and injustices. The discussions emphasised strengthening solidarity and networks at national, regional, and international levels to advocate for workers' rights and social justice. JTUCC and its affiliated organizations promised to continue their united efforts to uphold fundamental labour rights and create a just and equitable world, urging all stakeholders to join this mission.



**Annex-I**  
**PARTICIPANTS LIST**

S.N	Country	Name	Organization
1	Bangladesh	Ms. Mousumi Nishat Shimul	BMSF
2	India	Ms. Sonia George	SEWA
3		Ms. Kalpana Desai	HMS
4		Ms. Umanagendramani Makaraju	INTUC
5		Ms. Rekha Singh	Gharelu Kamkaji Mahila Union
6	Maldives	Ms. Aishath Rukhusana	MTUC
7	Pakistan	Ms. Dur-E-Shawar Shiraj	PWF
8	Sri Lanka	Ms. Chandrani Panditha	SLNSS
9		Ms. Bhoomi Harendran	Abhiman Trade Union and Transgender Activist
10		Ms. Paba Deshapriya	Lawyer and Activist
11	Nepal	Ms. Beli Maiya Ghale	GEFONT
12		Mr. Naranath Luitel	
13		Ms. Sushila Ghimire	NTUC
14		Mr. Bishnu Khadka	
15		Mr. Surendra Pandey	Maya Ko Pahichan, LGBTIQ+ Community
16		Mr. Sunil Babu Pant	Maya Ko Pahichan, LGBTIQ+ Community
17	SARTUC	Mr. Laxman Basnet	SARTUC/SAGP
18		Mr. Mahendra Sharma	
19		Ms. Nishi Kapahi	
20		Mr. Kishor Bikram Shah	
21		Ms. Sweanta Lama	

## AGENDA OF THE SEMINAR

DAY 01 – 15 <sup>TH</sup> FEB 2024		
17:00 – 17:45	<b>Opening of Seminar</b> Introduction of participants	<b>Bro Laxman Basnet,</b> General Secretary, SARTUC
17:45 – 18:30	Welcome to FNV Delegation	
18:30 – 19:30	About SARTUC/SAGP –	
19:30	<b>Dinner</b>	
DAY 02 – 16 <sup>TH</sup> FEB 2024		
09:30 – 11:00	Launch of Equality Campaign Issues and challenges faced	Sharing by the participants
11:00 -11:30	Tea/Coffee break	
11:30 -13:00	The Isolated & invisible Gender - An introduction to Transgender community	Bhoomi Harendran
13:00 – 14:00	<b>Lunch</b>	
14:00 – 15:30	Gender Perceptions & Misconceptions	Group Work
15:30 – 16:00	Tea/Coffee break	
16:00 – 17:00	Preparations for the Panel Discussion on 17 <sup>th</sup> Feb at WSF	Followed by conclusion
17 <sup>th</sup> February		
11 AM – 1 PM	Panel Discussion	
18 <sup>th</sup> February		
18 <sup>th</sup> February	Labour Forum	

