Good morning, everyone. My name is Francia Michel Blanco. I am a trans woman and trade unionist from Chinandega, in the beautiful Republic of Nicaragua. I am a woman who has gone through many difficult situations in life, not least coming to terms with my own identity in a family that rejected who I am. I was forced to travel to Guatemala, where I fell into the hands of people who exploited me as a domestic worker. I was locked inside for an entire year without receiving any pay or support, and so decided to flee the situation given, at this point, that I had no further contact with my family.

##### [00:00:44.020]

I then fell into the hands of people who forced me into sex work – something I had never wanted to do. But they took my ID – a common tactic for those who exploit workers or force people into sex work in foreign countries. They take your identification documents from you and force you to do things that you don’t want to do. I went through these awful experiences in Guatemala simply for being a trans woman, and for being a migrant trans woman in a country that was not my own. But it gave me the chance to reflect, a lot, on my own situation and identity. When I came back to Nicaragua I realised how difficult things are here for trans domestic workers.

##### [00:01:31.900]

There is very, very little access to work. Even those in work rarely have formal contracts because this generally means having a basic level of schooling and fitting into certain stereotypes that exist in a patriarchal culture like that in Nicaragua. Many trans domestic workers are being exploited, not receiving the minimum wage, in some cases not even getting wages at all, instead receiving pay in kind, often in the form of food.

##### [00:02:05.400]

It became clear to us that we needed to create a trade union specifically for trans women and the LGBTI community to fight for the rights of trans women at work, for domestic workers, but also for access to work and workplace inclusion for trans people. Thanks to the dedication and hard work of Andrea Morales, general secretary of the domestic workers’ union, FETRADOMOV, and Yadira Gómez, who is now general secretary of our trans domestic workers’ union, SITRADOTRANS, we decided to start the union with four other trans comrades. At that point, activism in the trans community had only been concerned with HIV. Trans women had this HIV label applied to them and everything was about testing, HIV prevention and consistent condom use.

##### [00:03:02.660]

But it didn’t go further than that. We understood the need for a decent job, to defend our rights and, where we did have jobs or our rights were violated, the need to know our rights, even in informal work or when running your own small business. It is quite common in Nicaragua for trans woman to be small traders, make-up artists or decorators. But the majority of trans workers in Nicaragua are in sex work, followed by domestic work.

##### [00:03:40.820]

We saw that the number of trans women working in houses was on the rise, often in substandard conditions: not receiving the minimum wage, not getting social security coverage, not having our identities respected, or being made to work longer hours than those allowed by law. In Nicaragua, thanks to ILO convention C189, employers are obligated to provide a written contract to all domestic workers. The law also stipulates that we have access to a decent living, at least the minimum wage, and that we are included in social security and are provided with a dignified and respectful working environment.

##### [00:04:38.600]

We founded the Union of Trans Domestic Workers without knowing that it was the first such union in the world. And when we looked into it, we realised that we are currently the only trade union of trans women doing domestic work anywhere on the planet. We fight for and defend our rights as trans domestic workers, but also for cisgender women doing domestic work and for the rest of the LGBTI community, as well. So, what have been our major challenges?

##### [00:05:15.260]

Firstly, coming into a historically patriarchal space like trade unionism. However, we now have many women who have set the precedent and are making change so we can achieve gender equality within trade unions and in the wider struggle for workers’ rights. Being able to join the labour movement was extremely important for us, and it was thanks to the fact that we are affiliated to the Nicaraguan Federation of Domestic Workers and Other Professions – under the excellent leadership of our general secretary, Andrea Morales, to whom we owe so much – that we’ve been able to access training on labour law, on organising, on the importance of joining a union, on the importance of access to work and workplace inclusion, but also on the importance of safe, health and dignified working conditions.

##### [00:06:23.570]

We want to extend a particular thank you to Andrea who has consistently included us. We are now also affiliated to the International Domestic Workers Federation through the Nicaraguan Federation of Domestic Workers and Other Professions. The IDWF also understands the need to work on issues that affect our vulnerable communities, and not only cis women.

##### [00:06:55.930]

Domestic workers are already vulnerable. As trans and LGBTI workers doing domestic work, our rights continue to be violated, despite the existence of the specific legislation we have in Nicaragua on domestic workers. We know we have an excellent legal framework in Nicaragua, but how the law is applied or enforced is a different matter entirely. We must remain constantly vigilant to ensure our rights are respected.

##### [00:07:32.650]

We have participated in digital campaigns for trans inclusion at work, but also for the ratification of ILO convention C190 and recommendation 206. These are both very important for trans women because they deal with the eradication of violence and harassment at work, something that we suffer on a daily basis. Here in Nicaragua, as in other countries in Latin America, we live in a patriarchal society with gender inequality and we have to constantly struggle for our rights, especially those of us in the trans and LGBTI communities. We live with constant stigma and discrimination from a hypocritical and heteronormative society, organised along a gender binary that doesn’t allow for other identities.

##### [00:08:39.850]

But, thanks to our struggle together with FETRADOMOV and the IDWF, we can say that we have won a space in the trade union movement, and we have won a seat at the table with decision makers. With FETRADOMOV, we have organised training for our members, including the creation of a Central American network to defend LGBTI rights at work, different modules on labour law, but also on how to protect LGBTI and trans domestic workers in their workplaces.

##### [00:09:37.210]

However, we are not just dealing with problems in the workplace, but also problems in getting a job. You might have a very strong CV but, nevertheless, many HR managers say they will call you for an interview, but you know they never will, because they are judging people by their identity and not their skills and ability to do the job.

##### [00:10:07.720]

We’ve joined FETRADOMOV at IDWF’s Latin American school and their “Luna” programme where we’ve gained emotional and technical skills to improve our recruitment capacity and coverage and to reach domestic workers who still haven’t joined a union. You need to know how to talk about the importance of joining a union to build our numbers. One swallow doesn’t make a summer.

##### [00:10:51.850]

Sometimes you need many swallows to make change and rise to greater heights, together. We’ve been able to do this thanks to the advocacy we’ve done together with FETRADOMOV, and through training, which has meant we are in constant communication, following each other’s work, knowing what opportunities are out there for furthering our members’ interests – not just for trans members but for all members of FETRADOMOV.

##### [00:11:32.740]

FETRADOMOV invites a quota of members from the Trans Domestic Workers Union to all its events and meetings. For FETRADOMOV, this type of training is essential for trans domestic workers to be able to make our points effectively when talking to decision makers and to communicate to them our most urgent needs as a community.

##### [00:11:50.980]

One of our main aims at the moment is training a team of trans union advocates. In Nicaragua, union advocates complete an academic course and are officially certified. This allows union activists to represent members in employment tribunals and labour disputes. We need LGBTI union advocates because it is not the same being represented by a straight, cis person as it is by someone from our community who understands the vulnerabilities, challenges and patriarchal attitudes we face. As trans women, we are often blamed for situations of which we are really the victims.

##### [00:12:55.640]

That’s why one of our medium-term aims is completing this training and getting our members certified as union advocates so that they can defend the rights of all members of SITRADOTRANS and FETRADOMOV because, as a trans union, we are inclusive and always include all the LGBTI identities who want to join.

##### [00:13:39.020]

Each part of the LGBTI community has its own particularities, but we all live with the same discrimination. In terms of short term aims, we are finishing a training project which has succeeded in training 60 activists to campaign for the ratification of ILO Convention 190, whilst emphasising how important it is that we are involved in this campaign, that we are on the front line of the demand to get ILO Convention 190 ratified.

##### [00:14:25.920]

We have a lot to gain from this convention because it aims to eradicate violence and harassment in workplaces. But it also deals with non-discrimination and protection from violence and harassment more generally. It means that when we go to apply for a job, our identity has to be respected, that an employer should only look at our CV and the skills we have for the post. What advice would we, as SITRADOTRANS, give to the trans workers of the world?

##### [00:15:02.160]

I think it is very important to find and follow good examples. At SITRADOTRANS, we’ve followed the example of FETRADOMOV, and we would invite other workers, be they in the Americas, or other regions of the world like Asia, Africa or Oceania, to build their own unions. We cannot leave any woman behind, because the feminist struggle isn’t a true struggle if it doesn’t include all women. And we know that women come in all different tastes, colours, textures and heights.

##### [00:15:38.910]

We are different but we are all women and we share the same struggle. So we have to include trans women, because they will struggle to form a union on their own without knowing anything about trade unionism. As happened with us, we need to get to know women in leadership positions in unions. They need to understand our situation but also teach us about trade unionism and workers’ rights.

##### [00:16:12.660]

I want to encourage all unions, wherever they are in the world, to include these vulnerable groups. I want to encourage them to innovate and unionise underrepresented groups. Only then can we be stronger everywhere in the world and stand up for the rights of all our trans comrades, who are presently being ignored. Not because they’re not there, but because they don’t know their rights. And we as trade unionists must seek out these people, organise them, build greater power than that which we currently possess.

##### [00:17:01.890]

The trans community needs to feel involved and needs to feel supported and needs to feel visible. But we also need to feel like we have the necessary tools to defend politically those rights that have so long been violated. The spaces we are creating are important. The IDWF, for example, has created a very important toolbox on how to carry out effective trade union work in the LGBTI community, but also with cis domestic workers. We have now succeeded in taking our campaign for visibility to important spaces at national level, to join international events and conferences, to share the story of our struggle and to spread our message: we form part of you, part of the IDWF, part of the global labour movement, part of the feminist struggle. We form part of that common struggle for the rights of all women trade unionists. One of the key strategies is creating inclusive unions as well as creating specific unions for the LGBTI community and to provide training about labour legislation, about rights at work, trade unionism, about mental health, which is vitally important and, above all, about resilience – something we as women know a lot about and undoubtedly helps up to keep up the struggle.

##### [00:19:02.740]

As Francia Blanco, as a trans woman, as one of the founders of SITRADOTRANS, but also as the executive member charged with workplace issues in the Nicaraguan Federation of Domestic Workers and Other Professions, FEDTRADOMOV, I am calling for solidarity, and I am calling for sisterhood. And in these times of the global pandemic, when we need much more human warmth at a distance, let’s not forget about any of our comrades, near or far. Because our struggle is not just for us, it is for all domestic workers.

##### [00:19:40.930]

It’s been a pleasure and thank you very much.