

THE 5TH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON WOMEN, WORK AND HEALTH*

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The 5th International Congress on Women, Work and Health took place in Zacatecas, Mexico from October 27-31, 2008. It was the most recent of a series of Congresses previously held in Barcelona (1996), Rio de Janeiro (1999), Stockholm (2002), and New Delhi (2005). The objectives of the Zacatecas Congress were to advance the discussion on the work and health of women while building collectivity and encouraging collaboration with the goal of improving women's working conditions. Academic researchers, members of grassroots organizations, union representatives, health professionals, and decision-makers planned and participated in the Congress, which brought together a diverse crowd of 625 individuals from 43 countries.

The Zacatecas Congress was organized with a variety of formats: workshops, plenary sessions, and oral and poster sessions enabled participants to exchange knowledge, experiences, and ideas. Forums promoted intensive discussion to define collective long-term projects, strengthen organizational work and develop networks. The Congress also included a public session with grassroots leaders, videos, photographic and craft exhibitions, dance performances, and an exhibition of altars honoring deceased women activists in the tradition of Mexico's Day of the Dead events (see Figure 1).

*Summary extracted from the document "Conclusions and Recommendations from the 5th International Congress on Women, Work and Health," written by A. Garduño Andrade and L. Cedillo Becerril on behalf of the Congress Organizing Committee.



Figure 1: Nélida Choquehuanca preparing flowers for Day of the Dead altars at 5th International Congress on Women, Work and Health, Zacatecas, Mexico. (Photo courtesy of Genny Lara)

The artistic and cultural agenda enabled us to look at women's issues from different perspectives. Through these activities the lives of working women and the damaging results of gender biases were illustrated. One of the most outstanding activities of the Congress was the public session, in which seven women leaders from a variety of occupations in Mexico, Central and South America, and the United States talked about the difficulties of organizing movements, yet reiterated the need to keep working to empower women and provide hope to those fighting for their rights.

The Congress themes followed a framework based on the social determinants of health and well-being. The conference included discussions of the role of broad political and economic systems and of local factors (e.g., workplace hazards) and their impact on women workers' health. Discussions also revolved around working conditions and associated health problems affecting specific groups of workers. The lacunae in social responses to these problems were addressed, and recommendations for action were proposed. Conclusions were also drawn about theoretical, methodological, and technical aspects important to



Figure 2: Day of the Dead altar created to honor the memory of women activists, Zacatecas, Mexico.
(Photo courtesy of Genny Lara)

researching women's work and health; participants pointed out persistent challenges while also identifying advances that had been made.

The Congress highlighted the need to adopt a gender equity perspective in all knowledge fields. Conceptual work is needed on the impact of new forms of work organization on women's and men's health. There is also a need to build on methodologies that consider women's and men's realities while taking into account diversity in such characteristics as age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, geography (rural-urban-suburban), identity, and ability.

More knowledge on the nature and impact of hazardous working conditions will help with diagnosing, recording, and compensating occupational injuries and illnesses and will allow for the development of appropriate prevention strategies, programs, and policies. Ultimately, knowledge acquisition should be done with the goals of increasing the visibility of women's working conditions and supporting women workers' struggles. It is indispensable that research funds allocated to these tasks be increased.

Research that extends the reach of traditional studies, namely that combines quantitative and qualitative methodologies, is necessary in this regard. Qualitative methodologies are valuable in that they can bring to light less visible issues and they can register complex matters such as the act of balancing professional and domestic activities. At the Congress, we illustrated how initiatives such as the use of photography as a projective technique can help support research.

The proposals that derived from the presentations in Zacatecas have led to the following possibilities for actions:

1. Promote collectivity among working women and between them and researchers, social and grassroots organizations, unions, and decision-makers to improve health by minimizing risks and equilibrating workload in remunerated and domestic work.
2. Propose and demand changes in the organization of work and in work-related rights, and develop initiatives to improve workers' access to information and training on issues of relevance to work and health and to appropriate health care and compensation.

Congress participants approved the following specific resolutions that emerged from the forums:

1. Promote the active participation of women in the monitoring of persistent organic compounds in mothers' milk.
2. Support the organization of domestic workers.
3. Develop a union strategy for gender equity, security, and health at work in Latin America.
4. Establish public policies for the protection of individuals who perform work in private homes.

5. Develop indicators for gender equity, work conditions, and health for population surveys.
6. Develop a Women, Work, and Health Initiative in the Americas.

Finally, participants in the closing sessions accepted a proposal that the Union Institute of Work, Environment and Health (ISTAS)¹ and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) lead the organizing committee for the 6th International Congress on Women, Work and Health to be held in Spain in 2012.

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