“Where is my dignity?”

- Claudia Jimenez, UNITE HERE

On June 11, 2016, the Coalition Against Workplace Sexual Violence organized “Restoring Dignity in the Workplace,” a historic gathering for women in low-wage industries to break the silence surrounding the devastating health and safety effects of workplace sexual violence. The gathering was the first of its kind, and took place at the Mexican Consulate in Chicago, IL. The Chicago Foundation for Women was the main event sponsor. Other organizing partners included Healing to Action, Latino Union of Chicago, Restaurant Opportunities Center of Chicago, Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, Rape Victim Advocates, Mujeres Latinas en Accion, LAF-Chicago, National Immigrant Justice Center, Community Activism Law Alliance, HEART Women and Girls, UIC School of Public Health, UNITE HERE Local 1, and Metropolitan Family Services.

The symposium was designed to bring people together to mobilize against sexual violence in invisible, low-paid and unregulated work. The program featured speakers from a variety of workplaces, including hotels, casinos, restaurants, private homes, and factories. The Coalition partnered with organizations to meet the direct service needs of participants including free attorneys, child care services and transportation. These services enabled participants to engage in discussions about why gender violence is a workplace health and safety issue and begin taking steps towards collective action. The program was bilingual with simultaneous interpretation from English to Spanish. 120 people attended from 17 organizations.

The Coalition thanks all our partners and sponsors, including the Mexican Consulate, for their generous donations to make this possible. The Coalition especially thanks the women who attended the symposium for generously sharing their expertise, time, and energy.
The Program

The day started with a panel featuring worker leaders who shared the following powerful stories.

**Kasey Nalls of UNITE HERE** told the audience about how her casino forced workers to wear uncomfortable uniforms which showed more cleavage, and guests would come to her home without her permission. She shared a study she had spearheaded with other leaders that found that **77% of UNITE HERE Local 1 members working in casinos were harassed on the job.**

**Claudia Jimenez of UNITE HERE** shared an incident of assault at work, where security questioned her instead of the harasser. She said it was her word against the guest's, and asked, **“Where is my dignity?”** She advocated for laws that would require hotels to ban abusive guests from returning.

**Nataki Rhodes of the Restaurant Opportunities Center of Chicago** explained that for restaurant workers relying on tips and paid a sub-minimum wage, it is easy to get taken advantage of. She shared efforts by ROC-Chicago to eliminate the tipped minimum wage through the One Fair Wage campaign. She said, **“If you're getting paid low wages, 9 times out of 10 you will face harassment.”**

**Esther Bolaños of Latino Union of Chicago** shared her story about starting out as a young factory worker. After months of fear and stress, she mustered up the courage to tell her harasser to back off. She talked about her current work as a domestic worker and organizer for the Illinois Domestic Worker Bill of Rights campaign, and stated **“domestic work is very dignified work.”**

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After the panel, the audience divided into workshops. Representatives from LAF-Chicago, CAASE and OSHA provided know your rights information in English and Spanish for workers. Counselors from Rape Victim Advocates facilitated healing workshops, where participants made self-care boxes together, storing calming items (essential oils, images, messages, and fabrics) to use to help center themselves when experiencing trauma or stress at work.

The last event of the day was a keynote address by CAWSV co-founder Myrla Baldonado, an internationally recognized organizer and human rights leader who previously worked as a caregiver. Myrla acknowledged the importance of creating spaces for women of color to speak about their experiences. She explained that the CAWSV curriculum (which she helped create) taught her how to think about gender violence. She talked about the difficulty of speaking out about sexual violence on the job, and shared her own experiences of breaking the silence. Finally, she called for a “movement of resistance to tolerance of sexual violence in the workplace, for all women in low-wage work.”
The Impact

The day ended with all the participants filling out an index card with their vision for a safer and more dignified workplace, and signing up for campaigns and actions that different partner organizations had talked about throughout the day. After the symposium, participants were offered an evaluation survey in English and Spanish in both paper and electronic formats, and 36% (22) of those contacted by email responded. The results were analyzed by researchers at the UIC School of Public Health. Both the index cards and the surveys provided important information for future planning. The respondents who provided demographic information were all women of Mexican, Filipina, Asian or White ethnic groups, who worked as caregivers, nannies, housecleaners or food service workers and ranged in age from 25 to 70 years old. Most heard about the event from symposium organizers.

“I now feel safer because I know there are people that support us against the abusers.”

- Participant

In the evaluations, many of the participants expressed they realized they were not alone in the community. Many were glad to have the opportunity to meet other survivors of workplace sexual violence across industries, racial divides, and ages. Other participants stated they thought differently about workplace sexual violence and no longer felt fear to assert their rights. One participant said she learned how to value herself. Numerous allies attended the symposium including organizers, attorneys, counselors, journalists, government representatives and academics. One participant stated, “Ahora me siento mas segura por que se que hay gente que nos apoya encontra los abusadores.” (“I now feel safer because I know there are people that support us against the abusers.”).

Participants said the most valuable things they learned were the high rates of sexual abuse at work; that workers have rights to be free from sexual abuse; the importance of voice, speech and communication about conditions and actions; the opportunity to talk with others about these conditions; the ability to be united and support each other across racial divides; and to be strong in response and support each

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4 Info graphics reflect evaluation questions with one or more responses.
other. When asked how they think differently about sexual violence after the symposium, participants expressed they felt more secure about their rights and actions, that they are no longer afraid, and that workplace change is possible. Participants’ values of dignity and respect for all in the workplace were validated and many stated that they want to overcome the shame and focus on healing. One participant said, “Most of all I learned about the importance of supporting each other and using my voice. Also the reality that to make change we have to be really strong, hold our ground, endure more, and act (if we wait our case might not even be valid!). I also learned more about rights and where to find legal support.” Another simply said, “No estoy sola.” (“I am not alone.”).

Participants shared that they would like to see more examples of how workplaces have succeeded in addressing sexual abuse and instituting dignity at work; more time to talk and discuss the issues; more workplaces holding sessions on sexual abuse prevention; and more training on support and assistance. One said, “We want to see consistency, follow up with the victim and give them support. We need to update/communicate with the victim as much as possible.” Some asked for education tools about sexual violence for men. One participant wrote, “I would like for this to begin by educating our sons.” Several participants said they wanted more legal resources. One shared frustration saying, “Wishing we had more legal aid for women...More laws are needed to stop sexual discrimination in the workplace.” Other participants indicated the need for political support. One said, “I’d like to see politicians at state and federal level involved.” Another said, “We need to fight for a fair budget in the State of Illinois. We need to work together to be able to keep programs open!”

Some participants shared that they wanted the coalition to grow. One said, “We should try to get more participants for their coalition.” Another stated, “Me gustaría ver esto en todos los lugares posibles, creo que es un tema que tiene que tener más dicusión, sobre todo porque hay muchisimas mujeres trabajando.” (“I would like to see this everywhere possible, I believe this is a topic that deserves more discussion, overall because there are lots of women working.”). 65% of participants took action to start improving workplaces by signing up to join campaigns. One participant stated, “Today’s event made me think it is possible to change workplaces for the better.”
For future sessions or events, most participants wanted additional training and leadership development. Approximately 80% of participants who responded expressed that they were interested in leadership development or additional training. Survey responses suggested the training should include ways to enhance prevention of workplace sexual abuse and make the companies safer; address trauma and healing; train workers in their first languages; teach how to defend themselves from abuse; and provide sessions for children and parents.

Participants suggested having sessions at sponsoring organizations such as Latino Union of Chicago, AFIRE and the Mexican Consulate, as well as mandatory sessions in workplaces. Several participants asked for similar events to take place in Chicago’s suburbs, specifically, in Zion and Waukegan.

**Recommendations**

Based on the voices of workers who led and attended the symposium, CAWSV has the following key recommendations for organizations who seek to support low-wage workers in fighting sexual violence:

**Center solutions in the experiences of workers themselves**— do not create policy solutions without listening to workers’ stories and hearing their ideas for change needed in their workplaces.

**Work across movements**— make sure that trauma-informed services are available if you are going to organize workers against sexual violence. Make sure there are spaces for survivors to organize and speak out, even if you are a direct service organization who provides individualized services.

**Work across industries**— the root causes of sexual harassment are the same in many workplaces: low wages, unregulated hours, sexualized dress codes and service expectations, informal labor contracts, and isolated workplaces. Thinking about commonalities between workplaces leads to broader solutions and stronger worker mobilization to enact them.

**Work across identities**— multicultural, inclusive responses to workplace sexual violence unite workers who are the most vulnerable to abuse due to language barriers, immigration status, disability, gender identity, racism, and state violence. Bringing these voices together helps workers to see they are not alone. Multicultural gatherings require careful planning and resources: multilingual interpretation, cultural competency in event planning, and accessible, safe spaces.
Conclusion

The symposium brought together people from around the city to talk for the first time about a painful and often invisible problem in low-wage workplaces. A key lesson from the symposium was that sexual violence occurs across industries, and regardless of age, ethnicity, or immigration status. This is a pervasive problem that requires cross-industry, cross-movement collaboration to address. Concrete policy solutions were offered, such as eliminating the tipped minimum wage, including domestic workers under state sexual harassment protections, and banning abusive guests from hospitality establishments. In addition to passing laws, workers voiced a desire to become leaders on this issue, in their communities and in their workplaces.

For more information, please contact:
Coalition Against Workplace Sexual Violence
endworkplacesexualviolence@gmail.com
@EndRapeAtWork