



Social dialogue is a tool for gender equality, says Sally Roever

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says Sally Roever**

Intro [00:00:09] Welcome to OECD Podcasts, where policy meets people.

Kate Lancaster [00:00:13] When it comes to work, no country in the world can be said to have fully achieved gender equality, even after decades of progress. There are still serious gender gaps. Women are still less likely than men to do paid work. And when they do, they earn less than men, on average about 15% less in OECD countries. Women are more at risk of harassment and violence in the workplace. And women also undertake more unpaid work in their households than do men – an additional work-life balance challenge. To explore the role of social dialogue in achieving gender equality in the world of work. I'm speaking today with Dr. Sally Roever. She's the international coordinator of Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising, known as WIEGO, a global network focussed on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, and into the informal economy. Welcome, Sally. And thank you for joining us.

Sally Roever [00:01:09] Thanks for inviting me. I'm delighted to be here.

Kate Lancaster [00:01:13] So, how can social dialogue and collective bargaining help to achieve gender equality and better job quality for women?

Sally Roever [00:01:20] Based on our experience, one of the most promising aspects of social dialogue is the path that it opens for the different parties in the dialogue to unpack their assumptions. And so I think that one of the most important contributions of social dialogue is in its ability to bring new information to light to the other parties. That may change the way that an issue is thought about or a, you know, a solution.

Kate Lancaster [00:01:51] So, for example, assumptions about a woman's experience in the workplace.

Sally Roever [00:01:55] Yeah. The assumption about women's experience in the workplace or also something that is being assumed away as not a problem...

Kate Lancaster [00:02:04] Such as...

Sally Roever [00:02:04] ...Might turn out that it is a problem. So, things like are there dark hallways or dark alleys that a woman must go through in the process of work? That's something that could be assumed away. Well, of course, she wouldn't be doing this or that, or, of course, there wouldn't be such a space. But maybe there is and you can't get there. You can't get to that knowledge without having a structured space in which the different parties can, you know, can bring to light these things that the other partners don't know or aren't aware of.

Kate Lancaster [00:02:37] So, dialogue really as a process. And it's interesting what you say because when people hear collective bargaining, I think they immediately go to wages. And in fact, I cited the number of women earning less than men. But it's a broader picture is what I'm hearing from you. It's all about the workplace conditions in every way.

Sally Roever [00:02:54] Yeah, I mean, one of the things that's interesting about the recent agreement on Convention 190, about violence and harassment in the world of work...

Kate Lancaster [00:03:02] Can you just tell us a little bit...what is Convention 190?

Sally Roever [00:03:05] ILO Convention 190 addresses violence and harassment in the world of work. It's a convention that was agreed in June of 2019.

Kate Lancaster [00:03:16] At the International Labour Organisation?

Sally Roever [00:03:17] The International Labour Organisation, yes. One thing that was so interesting about that is the conception of the world of work. What is the world of work consist of? Right. And so if you live in Europe or North America or some place, the world of work is like the place you go, you commute to and the place that you work.

Kate Lancaster [00:03:36] Right.

Sally Roever [00:03:36] And that's it, right? Yeah. But the convention allowed for an understanding of the world of work that's broader than that. So, it includes on the way to work. It includes workplaces that are public spaces, workplaces that are private homes, workplaces that might be a workshop in an alley. So it broadens what the world of work even is and offers, I think, in that way a new way of thinking about things like improving job quality at work. How do we think of work? Let's think of it in a very broad way and think about all the pieces of someone's work process, whether it's the commuting part or transporting goods, moving supplies, storage, all those sorts of things.

Kate Lancaster [00:04:23] And so social dialogue as a tool to help us make those broad connexions. But at the same time, I know their limitations, especially given that in many countries, trade union membership is declining. And given that women participate less in trade unionism than men.

Sally Roever [00:04:38] Right. So, yeah. So, one limitation certainly is how the existing social dialogue structures can incorporate a wider range of workers. Trade union density is declining. Membership is declining. Women are often not incorporated or not incorporated on equal terms necessarily. Although there are many trade unions, many global union federations that are working to improve that. And then there's the broader challenge of, you know, what about the workers who have never had access to a tripartite social dialogue platform?

Kate Lancaster [00:05:13] What does that mean? A tripartite social dialogue platform?

Sally Roever [00:05:15] So, where the parties are governments, employers and organised workers. So, if we think about the broad world of work, all workers in the world, 61% are in informal employment. And many of those, most of those in most countries don't have an employer. So, they are either own-account workers or they're contributing family workers or, you know, another kind of status.

Kate Lancaster [00:05:42] So, own-account workers, it's when you're self-employed and perhaps in a very informal structure for being self-employed and contributing family workers, is that when you you work for your family's business, essentially?

Sally Roever [00:05:53] Yes. Yeah.

Kate Lancaster [00:05:55] Over two billion people today are, as you've said, informally employed, which means they're doing work that is not well recognised, regulated or protected by the state. Their pay is usually low and the costs and risks for workers can be high. And I understand that there are over 700 million women who work in the informal sector. So how does WIEGO support these women and their families and what are the key issues you see for them?

[00:06:19] What WIEGO does is it provides a bridge between this lived experience of a woman who is living in poverty and working in informality, on the one hand, with the sort of global policy debates, on the other hand. So we try to provide that bridge through our membership structure and through our activities. So, our membership structure brings together membership-based organisations of workers in the informal economy, especially in sectors where women are overrepresented: so, domestic work, home-based work, street vendors, market traders, waste-pickers and so on.

Kate Lancaster [00:06:59] And are membership-based organisations is a union or it's something different?

Sally Roever [00:07:02] Some of them are unions. But in some cases, the workers in our network aren't allowed to [00:07:08]for Foremans [0.3s] or can't register as unions because many of them are self-employed. So, it is possible in some countries, but it's not possible in most countries. They have to look for alternative structures other than unions. So, it could be a national association or co-operatives, etc.

Kate Lancaster [00:07:25] Tell us a bit more about how you work with these membership-based organisations.

Sally Roever [00:07:28] Your membership [00:07:29]circular [0.0s] brings in those membership-based organisations of workers with individual constituencies, which are researchers and statisticians who have expertise on informal employment, and then policy practitioners who also have the sort of expertise and can see how the policy environment can relate to improving the conditions of informal work. And so, again, what WIEGO does is, is, yeah, sort of try to provide that bridge between a woman who's working in the informal economy and her lived experience, her perspectives putting the perspective of the informal worker at the centre. With the global policy debates to try to influence the way that, you know, the most influential institutions are thinking about employment and making sure that this different perspective that is often left out can come in.

Kate Lancaster [00:08:25] So, you're creating dialogue?

Sally Roever [00:08:27] Yes.

Kate Lancaster [00:08:28] I've also been struck by WIEGO's approach to leading by listening. You wrote that the most important thing that you've done is to listen carefully to ordinary people, ones who aren't considered experts, ones who are rarely invited to speak in policy discussions. So, how does such listening concretely inform the work of WIEGO? And how does it lead to better outcomes?

Sally Roever [00:08:50] So, I think it's a really important part of kind of our sort of values or our approach that we value, first and foremost, the perspective of the worker herself. And so we have a little bit of a different approach to knowledge generation. So, for example, in our research projects, we design the methodology in a way that can bring up the voice of the worker. As a valid source of knowledge about the conditions of the informal economy and how it has impacted – it's so important because oftentimes those of us who, let's say, came from research community or came from a formal sector experience or are coming from developed economies, just aren't going to see what that worker sees. And just aren't going to understand the problem in the same way as that worker. So, I'll give an example: one of the activities that we've done in the past is in partnership with SEWA Academy. So, SEWA is the Self-Employed Women's Association of India. It's the largest women-led trade unions – trade union of self-employed women – it's the largest one in the world. They have around two million members. And so what we do is we design a programme. It's about two and a half days long where we would bring in experts, economists, lawyers, judges and so on. Pair those people with a member of SEWA, who's a woman who lives in an informal settlement, who works in informal employment to accompany that woman over the course of a couple days. So, living in her house, sleeping on the floor, let's say, of a one-room house in an informal settlement, that has water for two hours a day, that maybe has electricity for two hours a day and then accompanies her as she goes through her work routine. So, she's a vegetable vendor. That means getting up at 4:00 in the morning, going to the wholesale market, having her husband negotiate the price of the purchase of vegetables because women are not allowed to do that. They have to bring their husbands to do the negotiation. That's not something that you and I would think about, right? So, it's for that. Then, taking the vegetables, trying to figure out how to get them to the piece of sidewalk where she's permitted to sell, and then sitting on the sidewalk on, like, an upside-down plastic crate for 10 hours to sell vegetables and no bathroom, no walking around, no eating, no drinking. So, sitting in the hot sun or the cold rain or whatever it is. So that's a methodology that kind of brings to light just how valuable the knowledge is that she would have about how informal employment works.

Kate Lancaster [00:11:54] And then how did they take that knowledge and use that to build solutions and ensuring that her voice is heard in the solutions. Because I'm sure that every woman has an opinion on how things could be made better for them as they should.

Sally Roever [00:12:07] True enough. Yes. Yeah.

Kate Lancaster [00:12:07] How do you take that and use that to inform the next steps?

Sally Roever [00:12:11] So, I think if we're talking about that methodology itself, what happens after that exposure would be a dialogue. And there's a personal dialogue where the participants, beginning with the worker, talk about the experience of having a foreign guest, a lawyer or a judge or an economist in her home for a couple days, and how she experienced that. And then the participant would share his or her perspective after the personal dialogue. There would then be a technical dialogue with the relevant, let's say, local government or national government in which ideas could be shared. That, again, would maybe change some assumptions about the way things work. So, that's like at the level of that methodology in particular. But then more generally, what's done with the knowledge produced through this sort of our approach to knowledge generation is finding ways in which women workers can represent themselves in global policy forums, policy making forums. Where policies are made, where ideas are formed. Things like that. So, for example, WIEGO would support a delegation of worker leaders to the International Labour conference just about every year. So, domestic workers, waste-pickers, street vendors, home-based workers to be part of that process. Again, WIEGO does not represent workers. We try to facilitate spaces where worker leaders can represent themselves through their organisations or represent their organisations in these settings. So, it's a way of just enabling women to speak for themselves in settings where they often aren't. Going back to the Convention on Violence and Harassment, one of the worker leaders – name is Lorraine Sibanda – she's the president of StreetNet International, which is a global network of street-vending organisations. She's a street vendor herself, and she was able to be on the floor speaking about experienced...how does a woman street trader experience violence? And how can that experience or that knowledge be brought into this very high-level discussion of how violence and harassment in the world of work should be considered? And it's a very effective model.

Kate Lancaster [00:14:32] Thank-you very much, Sally. It's really been a pleasure talking with you and getting this broader view of what is social dialogue and what it can accomplish. Thank-you again for your time.

Sally Roever [00:14:41] My pleasure.

Kate Lancaster [00:14:42] I'm Kate Lancaster. Thank-you for listening to OECD Podcasts. You'll find much more about the issues we've been discussing today at [OECD.org](https://www.oecd.org) and [WIEGO.org](https://www.wiego.org).

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