

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST
LGBTQ+ Domestic Workers Win Rights with Their Union
Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director
Guest: Francia Blanco, technical team, SITRADOVTRANS, Nicaragua

Trigger warning: This episode contains descriptions of sexual assault.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hello, sisters and brothers. Welcome to The Solidarity Center Podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions, and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also the executive director of the Solidarity Center in Washington, D.C. We're the largest US-based international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities, and for greater equality in the global economy, and for one, just future.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Around the world, discrimination and exclusion violate the human rights of LGBTQ individuals, and prevent full access to education, healthcare and employment. Today, we're going to focus on Central America where LGBTQ people face barriers to decent work that often results in poverty and human rights abuse. For transgender people, just being honest about one's gender identity or expression can lead to harassment, abuse, rejection from your family and job loss. The inability to fully participate in the workforce perpetuates economic inequality, and it undermines democracy. My guest today is union activist and leader in Nicaragua, Francia Blanco, who is working with transgender domestic workers through the Nicaraguan Domestic Worker Union Federation, FETRADOMOV.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Transgender domestic workers in Nicaragua report being paid less than poverty wages that are all too common across the sector, forcing people to work only for meals and a place to sleep due to lack of employment opportunities. Transgender people say they are often rejected by their families, and forced to make their own living from as young as 11 years old. But the LGBTQ community in Nicaragua, estimated to be 600,000 people, is active, organized, and has achieved important legal protections, most notably, the creation of an LGBTQ ombudsperson in the current government administration. Today, we're going to be learning about a Nicaraguan domestic workers union of exclusively transgender domestic workers form to ensure that these workers have the space, and representation to advocate for their priorities, raise visibility around their key issues and concerns, and take on union leadership opportunities within the broader federation. Francia will tell us more with the help of our translator, Jazmin Rumbaut.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Could we start out with, could I ask you to introduce yourself, your name, your job title, and your pronouns?

Francia Blanco:

My name is Francia Blanco, and I'm on the technical team of SITRADOVTRANS, which is the trans domestic workers union in Nicaragua. I'm also in charge of international relations for FETRADOMOV, which is part of it.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

In this podcast, we're looking at different types of activists and leaders across the labor movement. We're learning more about their activism, and their leadership, and the conditions of work that they've

experienced. Can you tell us in your experience in the domestic worker's movement, and your life in Nicaragua. In particular, what are some of the ways that domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to mistreatment on the job, and what are some of the experiences that are common for domestic workers in the region?

Francia Blanco:

I just have to start by saying, when I'm telling you about my experience, I am a trans woman in Latin America. And in Latin America, the life expectancy for a trans woman is 35 years. Which, I'm 35 right now, so that means I've reached the limit of what statistics say is the amount of time for trans women in Latin America is likely to live. I started working as a domestic worker as a young age. I was 17 years old, and I had migrated to a totally different country, that's one that had a strong history of machismo patriarchal society. As a trans women, and this is in 2005, 2006, the word trans didn't even exist then as a term. So that was even more discrimination that I was facing, especially because it wasn't my own country of origin. So you see, it was a double discrimination because of being trans, and being from a different country, and being in a country as well without being registered legally. It was really one of the most frustrating experiences of my life to have faced what I had to face then.

Francia Blanco:

I spent about a year working in the home as a domestic worker, forced to work, unpaid, practically kidnapped. After a year of that, I was able to flee and return to Nicaragua. When I did return to Nicaragua, I did so with a stronger sense of struggle, and of wanting to defend the human rights of trans women. Just to tell you, Shawna, how things were in Guatemala besides being kidnapped as I mentioned, they also tried to abuse me sexually. Thankfully though, I have an angel that had been at my side and help that not to happen. I was able to flee, I had to engage in sex work, which is something that many trans women do out of necessity, and out of a lack of access. So being able to do anything else.

Francia Blanco:

Back in Nicaragua, I just felt that I wanted to study. So I went to the Regional Institute in the west, and decided that I really wanted to dedicate myself more fully to the struggle for human rights for trans women. I'm talking about the real struggle that addresses the lack of access that we face as women. That also means a lack of access to employment. We're talking about living with less than a dollar a day as trans women, without having social security, without having minimum wage, and without having access to formal jobs. A lot of times, it's domestic work. That's domestic work with no contract, maybe not even a verbal contract, and to be exploited, and to not receive a fair pay for our work.

Francia Blanco:

A lot of trans women also don't even have basic education such that they're unable to read and write, which means that they are more likely to be exploited and end up working, not even for pay, but just for food. That's how serious the situation is. We're talking about living in the informal sector of work without having access to the most basic things such as health care, or food, or housing, or education, which is so very important to be able to get access to better work.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Francia, when I listened to your story, I hear a really powerful and painful injustice. I know we're going to talk about your work to expand the human rights of domestic workers and the trans community in

particular. But I first wanted to ask you about the moment in Guatemala, how did you know you had to leave, and how did you escape?

Francia Blanco:

There was a whole year where I was working in a home. I was being exploited for my work, and I decided that I had to flee. When I did that, I took two months to really analyze the situation, and plan how I was going to do it. One day I ended up doing, I was leaving very early in the morning. The people whose house I was working in a taqueria, a taco stand, they close at 11 or 12 at night. By one or two in the morning, they were asleep, that's when I decided to flee. I took the keys, and I opened the gate. I ran and ran and ran until I got into a highway, and asked someone if they could help me out, and take me to the nearest city. And they did, they took me on a motorcycle.

Francia Blanco:

Unfortunately, as a trans woman, you experienced so many unfortunate things. I thought that this person who have decided to help me was an angel, but by the time we got to our destination, what he said is that I had to have sex with him in exchange for him having taken me outside the city. The thing is that a lot of times trans women are really considered more objects, or fetishized, or considered anything but a human being that has actual real feelings. So many things happened to me when I was in Guatemala, and those things have made me strong. Those things have made me believe even more in God, because I am a believer.

Francia Blanco:

I was able to go back to my country, and study, and be able to learn to do something, to help other women who think that they have to risk everything to leave the country illegally, and don't necessarily know what risks that implies or even to leave legally. A lot of times, they don't know what life is like in the other countries. Even within the same region, they have very different cultures. What I'm really proud of is being able to have help found the union of trans domestic workers and affiliated fields, which is really very important. Historically, we're the first union in the world composed entirely of trans women to protect the rights of workers, labor rights and human rights of trans women. I'd really like to talk more about that.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Francia, thank you for sharing your story. You were just starting to tell us more about SITRADOVTRANS, why it was founded. You were talking about the real struggle for human rights for trans people, and for domestic workers, and what that looks like. Can you tell us more about what that real struggle looks like, and about the union.

Francia Blanco:

The thing is that most people in the trans community didn't even know that we had labor rights, we knew about this movement for HIV prevention, but it wasn't until I was working with Andrea Morales who is a secretary general of FETRADOMOV, which I mentioned earlier, working with her, she was able to really give me the opportunity to create this union. We started with six founding members, all trans women. The first thing that we did in that process was to learn more about labor rights, about unions, and about rights not just on the national but also on the international level, like the Convention 189 which Nicaragua has signed and does belong to.

Francia Blanco:

So we had to learn that even without formal jobs, we still have labor rights. A lot of these girls didn't know that they had them, whether or not they had a formal or informal job, that they do have labor rights and that there are laws to protect them, and that they could use those to raise their voice and be protected as workers. A lot of the times we are used to not having labor protections, to being fired without cause, with impunity for instance, or even not having access to jobs that we are qualified for and have the training for, but are discriminated against because of our identity, because our names are different than the names that come listed on our IDs. Because on your identification, there is legal name that your parents gave you.

Francia Blanco:

After we went through all of these trainings, we went on the process of getting people to join and to affiliate with us. There are now more than 300 in the union. Most of these are trans women. But because we are also an inclusive union, we also have representation from other identities that are LGBTQ+ for example, lesbian women or gay men. We live in a society that is highly patriarchal, that is machista. An important part of what we did was to be able to undergo this process of training and learning about our rights as workers internationally, and also nationally. I'm really proud that after five years, our union is still going strong.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

After the break, we'll talk about the exponential growth of the trans domestic workers union that Francia started, and the importance of working with other central American unions to gain visibility for their organization, as well as normalized transgender participation and representation in the labor movement.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hi there. It's Shawna again. I just wanted to take a minute to invite you to check out RadioLabour, the international labor movements radio service. RadioLabour produces daily newscasts about union events and issues. It also produces special programs to support labor campaigns around the world. Check out RadioLabour at radiolabour.net, and find out more about worker rights struggles around the world, and how the movement is supporting their efforts for decent wages, fair treatment, and strong communities. Follow and subscribe at radiolabour.net.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Wow. From six founding members to 300 members in an inclusive union led by trans women, it's really exciting and impressive, and it's the dream of the labor movement to build power for all workers. I really congratulate you on that amazing achievement. You mentioned, you're also involved with FETRADOMOV. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about why it's important for a labor union like yours to be involved with national unions and national labor structures.

Francia Blanco:

Well, for us as a trans union, it's very important for us to affiliates with unions on the national level because that affords us more protection than if we were alone, because one swallow does not a summer make. We have more support when we are in greater numbers. And that is really very important for us because it's the way that we are able to gain spaces, to be able to convene, and be in

bigger groups and meetings, and organized with the cis . This really makes a big difference. Also, we are domestic workers, and most trans women see domestic work as one of the few options that they have access to.

Francia Blanco:

It's one of the jobs that they have most access to, and it's domestic labor. It's also other affiliated fields, other things like doing hairdressing, working in landscaping, gardening, and maintenance for the companies. We are also domestic workers, and when we are united and affiliated with these other unions, and a lot of these are made up of cis women or heterosexual women. That's really important because then we are all one.

Francia Blanco:

We may have differences in identity, we may have differences of our ethnic backgrounds, or our colors, or our sexual orientation. In the end, we are all women, and we are all part of the same struggle for the same cost. When we affiliate with other unions, what it does is open up spaces so that we can raise our voices, and also open those spaces for other unions to be formed because there are a lot of trans women who need that. We want to be focused on something like access to work and personal growth. And even if we have jobs, to also recognize that we have rights as workers, and for the employers to recognize that we have rights as workers.

Francia Blanco:

Right now, we are united with other active in the labor movement across Latin America. Yes, we are concerned with the struggle in Nicaragua, but as well, we are concerned for the approval of Convention 190. That's important because we want to support that protection from violence and harassment in the workplace that as trans women, we are always facing every day. It's an important tool, then. Convention 190 would be an important tool to make sure that we have laws in our country that can protect us from that sort of violence and harassment in the workplace that lot of domestic worker women faced working in homes. That often are unrecognized as a workplace.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well. Thank you for that. I'm really interested to hear with the growth of your union and your outreach across borders and internationally as you're affiliated with the International Domestic Workers Federation, I'm curious to know more about what improvements you are starting to see in the working lives of trans domestic workers.

Francia Blanco:

So even though it is a very rich story that I'm sharing, we all know that sometimes results can be slow to appear, they can happen bit by bit. But we are always training up more of our members to not only learn more themselves but also find more women in the community who want to be part of this process. It's an ongoing process because we know that we live in a globalized world, and things are always changing. This isn't something that can stop. We have to always be moving with it. What we want to make sure is that all of these women are able to be trained to learn what their rights are, and also to defend themselves. At the same time, to be able to support others who might need that same support to defend their rights. Of course we are focused on the ratification of Convention 190.

Francia Blanco:

In fact, right now what we're seeing is a boom of worker rights activity. Even within the organizations who haven't really been focused on that in the past. They do seek us out as well, because they want that kind of a training that we can provide with quality and with warmth. Even though we are 300 strong, we know that there are many other women out there, many of whom belong to other organizations, and we also want them to know what their rights are, and that our union exist.

Francia Blanco:

We also, right now are in Nicaragua presenting the network of Latin American and Caribbean trans women or REDLACTRANS. Working on campaigns as well to have a... As they have in Argentina, a standard to have a minimum representation of trans workers. That's something that we don't have in Nicaragua. We'd like to have that. In fact, in Nicaragua, we also don't have a law that protects people because of their gender identity. That's something that can really limit our growth as trans women. So we do offer this visibility and that's something that we have. Something that we have now is this great visibility. People know us and people seek us out.

Francia Blanco:

We also want to be working with other organizations as well always, so that we can continue to open up pathways for growth. The future that we want for trans women is to be able to have access to work and to housing, and that's a process. What we want and what we know is important to start is for folks to have some knowledge of what their rights are, and to be empowered to demand that they be respected. We also know that new members are important to be part of a smart strategy for us. A lot of times that is going to depend on what happens in the national assembly, but the campaigns that we do to make sure that the rights for trans women are always on the public agenda.

Francia Blanco:

I wanted to mention also that we are working as a union with the International Organization for Migration. We know that in Nicaragua, it's a country of migrant workers. Many people migrate to work as domestic workers in other countries. Now, besides the topic of human trafficking, we are also concerned with the topic of documented migration through legal means because a lot of women do migrate because of discrimination, because of lack of access to employment. But what we want to encourage is being able to do that through the normal channels, and who better than to partner with these international organization for migrants.

Francia Blanco:

Also, I wanted to mention our work with the Central American Network for justice, for LGBT workers. And that is a network of three countries: Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. What we're focusing on is teaching workers about their rights as LGBTQ, LGBT workers. We think that learning, really education, is so important to all of us as a community. I wanted to mention also as well, that we have managed to open up spaces for discussions, with decision makers, including national assembly members in Nicaragua. We've also been able to garner media attention and traditional media. And that is something that we hardly used to see at all before.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

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Francia, I wanted to deeply appreciate your leadership. I want to thank you for sharing the vision of a better world for trans women, and for all domestic workers with us. I'm really proud to have had the chance to hear about and be a part of this story with you. Thank you for your leadership.

Francia Blanco:

It's a pleasure. Here we are in the struggle.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

For me, Francia's story really demonstrates the full scope of what a labor movement can stand for. And the many ways unions support worker rights, because worker rights are human rights. Working at the intersection of labor, gender, and identity, Francia's goals don't end with challenging the status quo for domestic workers to improve wages and working conditions. She's exploring and even exploding deeply held cultural beliefs about masculine and feminine roles in society, and the value of the transgender community in Nicaragua and other central American countries she works in. As Francia says, "This is a marathon, not a sprint." Gains can be incremental and governments can be slow to respond to the needs of their citizens, especially those in communities that have been historically marginalized or consistently denied a seat at the table. Francia's success over the past five years and the partnerships she's created with established unions outside of the trans domestic worker community shows us how unions are powerful places, where workers confront and address all inequalities, all barriers, standing between them and full workplace dignity.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Thanks again to Francia for the work she is doing in Nicaragua, so vital and so inspiring. Special thanks to our translator Jazmin Rumbaut. And thanks to you for listening. Don't forget to subscribe to the Solidarity Center Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you find your shows. Learn more about the Solidarity Center at solidaritycenter.org and through our social media on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Tune in next week, as we talk to Adriana Paz, the Latin America regional coordinator for International Domestic Workers Federation, about organizing domestic workers, many of whom are women of color, and from indigenous communities, during a pandemic. This podcast is a production of the StoryProducer.com with Executive Producer Tyler Green, and Producer and Engineer Adam Yoffe.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

The Solidarity Center Podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network. Special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, we work to ensure a righteous future for workers, dignity, freedom, equality, and justice. And a shout out to Pride at Work, aligned with the US labor movement that represents LGBTQ union members in the United States. Check them out at prideatwork.org. For the Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.