

Standing Up for Workers' Rights

Zinash Fereja

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. What workplace rights do we have in the U.S.? How do you think people won those rights?
2. What workplace rights do people have in your country of origin? How did people win them? How do they compare to U.S. labor rights?

In the U.S.

I like that U.S. workers have rights in the workplace. If your employer discriminates against you, you can protect yourself under the U.S. labor law.

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We have these rights in the U.S. because of the labor movement, which has a long history of fighting for protections for U.S. workers. For example, in 1834 mill girls in Lowell went on strike to protest

wage cuts. In 1890, the carpenters union went on strike for the eight-hour day. In 1903, the labor organizer "Mother Jones" led children in a march from Philadelphia to New York. They wanted better child labor laws.

The fight for a fair workplace continues to this day. In 2009, President Barack Obama signed a law that said working women could sue over pay discrimination. Recently, people have fought for a higher minimum wage. Over time, workers have won many things, including health and safety laws, higher wages, and other protections.

And in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, where I am from, we have some labor laws, but most of them have failed. For example, men and women are equal under Ethiopian law, but women still face discrimination in the workplace. Women cannot get equal opportunities. They don't have equal access to education and scholarships, and it's hard for them to advance in their careers. Women experience sexual harassment at work, but the law does not punish the men who are responsible. In some cases, if a woman wants a better job, she has to satisfy her boss's sexual interest, and that is really embarrassing for women in the workplace.

Since I grew up in a family business, I did not have personal experience of discrimination. But my women friends in Ethiopia have shared their stories with me, and I have read about the problem. Fortunately, the current Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Dr. Abiy Ahmed, is taking the country in the right direction. For example, in his current cabinet, 50% of ministers are women, and

Men and women are equal under Ethiopian law, but women still face discrimination in the workplace.



Ethiopia supports women entrepreneurs by giving them loans and training. Photo: World Bank.



Photograph shows Mother Jones with children and adults beginning their walk from Philadelphia to New York, to publicize the conditions of children working in textile mills (1903). Source: Library of Congress.

Sahle-Work Zewde is the first female president of Ethiopia. Many Ethiopian people are fighting for women's rights at work and in society, and I feel that, over time, we can establish more freedom for women in Ethiopia.

In conclusion, discrimination in the workplace not only hurts the person who has been targeted, but it hurts the whole society. People in the U.S. and in Ethiopia are still fighting for workers' rights.

AFTER YOU READ: According to the author, what are some of the ways people fight for workplace rights?

Source: <aficio.org/about-us/history>

Zinash Fereja is a student at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge, MA. She is married, has two beautiful children, and is interested in arts and design.



Take It Further

After reading the article and the caption under the photo on p. 54, discuss the possible benefits (and limits) of supporting women entrepreneurs. How might it work as a strategy for addressing discrimination against women in the workplace?

Learn more about Mother Jones and the march to New York. Watch this 5-minute video about child labor in Philadelphia in the early 1900s: <vimeo.com/321012568>.

Share a time you have stood up for your rights on the job. Were you by yourself or with others? What happened? (See the "Good Jobs..." issue of *The Change Agent*.)