ADDRESSING THE REPRESENTATION GAP IN MICRO AND SMALL ENTERPRISES:
SOME CRITICAL FACTORS

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In an earlier study done by one of the authors, a complexity of factors was identified that influence the representation of workers in micro and small enterprises (MSEs): i) the legal framework; ii) issues of labor law implementation and enforcement; iii) employers’ attitude to unionization; iv) trade union strategies; and v) MSE workers’ willingness to join the union. This paper identifies critical factors and variables that may affect or influence collective representation of workers in micro and small enterprises (MSEs). It attempts to address the question: What organizing themes and strategies would encourage MSE workers to organize?

The results of a survey conducted among MSE workers both unionized and non-unionized in 11 countries were analyzed using SPSS and relevant literature. Twenty five variables for the whole sample, 20 of which are treated as independent variables and five dependent variables which were also treated as independent variables in certain cases were explored and analyzed. The independent variables are grouped into demographic and employment-related variables. The demographic-related variables include gender, educational level and age, whereas the employment-related variables include job length categories, existence of employment contract, formal job training, applicability of skills in other jobs, opportunity to increase skills, safety at work, existence of OHS regulations, negative health effects of work, night work, earn the same amount of money monthly, existence of minimum wage, existence of benefits, worker contributing to social security, employer shouldering the social security contribution, job satisfaction, and problems encountered at work. The dependent variables, which may be grouped as representation variables include: willingness to join a union, heard of a union in the sector, unionized or not, previous attempts to organize, and opportunity for collective action.

Bivariate statistical analyses were undertaken to explore the relationship between the variables. Cross-tabulations were used to explore the significance of relationship between categorical variables. Independent T-test was used to test the relationship between continuous and categorical variables.

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Findings

The findings provide empirical bases to the literature review on MSE representation done earlier by Xhafa.\textsuperscript{3} In this earlier study, she highlights two main approaches in addressing the twin issues of representation and protection of MSE workers: (i) state-led approach with the State enacting the laws and regulatory framework and enforcing it, sometimes with the involvement of trade unions; and (ii) a bottom-up approach, which basically comprises actions from the unions and NGOs or other community groups.

Survey results highlight the importance of national legislation to establish, implement and enforce the critical factors addressing representation and organisation of MSE workers identified by the study. These critical factors that require legislative intervention include the following: (1) establishment and/or implementation of formal employment contracts; (2) enhancing job security and protection of union rights especially the right to organise; (3) subsidized and/or affordable social security for MSE workers and provision of support and incentives to MSEs to encourage employee and employer participation in social security programs; and (4) establishment of facilities for skills training and upgrading for MSE workers.

Findings of the study point to several critical representation factors that could serve as entry points or spaces for collective representation and for enhancing MSE workers willingness to organize and/or join a union. These factors are: (1) union action (political, campaigns, legislative initiative, etc.) for the critical factors requiring legislative intervention identified above; (2) inclusion of skills training and upgrading among union services; (3) using safety at work, grievances or problems at work and income security or stability (e.g. minimum wage campaigns) as organizing themes; and (4) establishment and/or strengthening of other forms or structures of organisation to represent MSE workers (territorial structures, community-based organising, workers’ associations, cooperatives, etc). These factors will indeed require creative and innovative imagination, increased union visibility in the MSE sector and stronger role of unions in addressing issues and concerns of MSE workers in particular and the working class and the poor in general.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.