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Spotlight interview with Souad Charit, General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA)

"It is time for women to say 'enough is enough!'"

Brussels, 4 March 2005 (ICFTU Online): As part of the ICFTU's international campaign "Unions for Women, Women for Unions", the General Union of Algerian Workers has launched a nationwide campaign to organise women, the priority target group being women in the textile sector. Alongside this organising drive, the UGTA is also leading a campaign against sexual harassment, as Souad Charid explains.

Souad Charid is member of the Executive and chair of the Women's Committee in Chlef, 200 km south of Algiers, and a member of the UGTA's National Women's Committee. Having started out in the education sector, Souad Charid now works as a trainer at the National Institute of Trade Union Studies and Research into Campaign Communication and Coordination Methods.

You are involved in a campaign for the revision of the Family Code. Why is this so important for Algerian women?

The Code, which dates back to 1984 - a time when pressure from militant Islamists was very strong - contains articles that give women the status of minors. In this respect, it is unlawful, as it contravenes the Algerian constitution, which enshrines the right to equality. According to the Code, for example, an adult woman cannot marry by civil law without her father's approval. Women close to militant Islamic circles accept this principle, in the same way as they accept polygamy, something which we categorically refuse. I travel to different regions to mobilise women, to raise awareness about why this is so important for women.

We are also involved in a campaign on the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In 1996, Algeria ratified the CEDAW convention, although with reservations in respect of Article 2, which conflicts with the Family Code, Article 9 (which provides for equal rights between men and women as regards to the nationality of their children) and Article 29 (concerning recourse to a committee of experts in the event of disputes unresolved through negotiation, and the possible referral of cases to the International Court of Justice should arbitration fail). We see this Convention as a major step forward for the emancipation of women, a step forward that is very important to us. International law provides us with strong leverage in Algeria, given that there are still many demands to be addressed at national level. It is, moreover, based on the principle of international law that we are resting our case to secure a revision of the Family Code.

You are waging a major campaign against sexual harassment. Have you already achieved results and how are you pursuing this fight?

In November 2004, we secured a new article (341) in the Penal Code condemning sexual harassment. It was a great victory. But after this legislative victory we had to move on to the next phase: encouraging women to break the wall of silence. This is the new phase of our campaign. It is time for women to say "enough is enough"! In Arab societies in particular, we are the victims of age-old traditions. My mother lived through the same experiences as my grandmother; things do not evolve the way they should. It's intolerable.

A year ago, we set up a call centre to listen and provide support to the victims of sexual harassment. We have already registered over a thousand psychological support and counselling sessions. Thanks to the funding provided by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), we have been able to produce an information booklet, which has been widely distributed, as well as advertising our call centre in the media. We have discovered that sexual harassment, which we had thought generally limited to the big cities, is, in fact, a problem that arises throughout the country. We also thought that certain groups of women, such as divorcees, for example, who are seen in a negative light which pushes them to the edge of society, would be the main victims. But not at all, we have realised that all women, married or not, are potential victims. We also thought that sexual harassment is generally directed towards young women, believing older women to be better protected. But not at all, we have received testimonies from women over 50 years old. It can, in fact, affect all women.

The transition to the market economy currently underway in Algeria has led to a sudden escalation in informal work. Many women's employment situation is now very precarious. How are you, as a union, able to help them?

To give you an example, in the textile sector there are many women who are paid (rather badly), but do not have any kind of social protection. They are also confronted with health and safety problems, sexual harassment, and so on. They suffer terrible stress, trying to keep their jobs at all costs. We try to organise them, but it's very difficult. They are terribly afraid of losing their jobs if they join a union. In this sense, it is very difficult to develop projects, and we really need to learn about the initiatives taken by unions elsewhere to inspire us.

Concerning the general situation of women in your country, you insist on the gap between legislative equality and inequalities in practice. What strategies should be adopted to bring about a change in mentality?

It's true that changing mentalities is the hardest task. When I was working in the south of the country, a young boy, aged 10, called out to me in the street saying, "Your face is not covered, have you no shame?" I was really shocked by that. It's going to take a long time to change such ideas.

In the world of work, it is still very difficult for women to reach positions of responsibility. The serious lack of crèches and childcare facilities is a major obstacle. We have to do twice as much to prove that we are capable of taking on responsibilities in the workplace. But there are some encouraging signs. Women's level of education in Algeria is high. There are, in fact, more women than men at university. In the long run, this is going to force a change. In political circles, women are really starting to progress. We are starting to go beyond the stage where parties put women at the forefront just for the sake of their image. I am not only fighting for myself, but also for my daughter, so that she and all the women of tomorrow can enjoy a better place in society.

I share the same philosophy as the UGTA, which advocates progressive change. It's the only sustainable approach, as opposed to brutal changes that would create divisions and block any real progress. It is a very long and difficult fight, but I am optimistic by nature, and the main thing is to feel that, little by little, we are making solid progress.

What is the situation of women within the UGTA?

In 2002, when the National Women's Committee was set up, there were only a few thousand women members. There are now 130,000, that is, 10% of the UGTA. Having fought bitterly, we have secured advances that we now want to take forward.

In the beginning, the male leaders were afraid that we would impose a "territorial division". But that's not what we want at all. We are not at the public baths or the mosque, where there are separate areas for men and women. Men and women workers share the same reality, the same problems, even though gender-specific problems have to be taken into account.

Today, we are now able to say that we enjoy the full support of the trade union leaders at policy level. When it comes to obtaining the necessary resources, however, it's less straightforward. We are very uncertain, for example, about the future of our campaign against sexual harassment, because of the lack of funding. We hope to organise a caravan very soon that would go to two or three regions of the country to raise women's awareness of the issue. But our only option is to organise the project on a purely voluntary basis; we are very limited. The lack of funding also affects our call centre, as the price of communications remains an obstacle, but we are not able to set up a freephone service. Similarly, we cannot cover the phone in the evening. All the psychologists and trade unionists covering the phones are voluntary. We need funding to secure the future of this project.

Interview by Natacha David.

Nb. For more information on the campaign to organise women in the informal economy and on the general situation of women in trade unions in Algeria, also see the interview of Soumia Salhi, published on 8 March 2004 (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991219064&Language=EN>)

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