

## ICFTU OnLine...

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### 8 March: International Women's Day

Spotlight interview with Hakeima Ahmad Al-Rukhmiu (Yemen- GFWTUY)

"The number one priority for Yemeni women is education"

Brussels, 3 March 2005 (ICFTU Online): Hakeima Ahmad Al-Rukhmiu, aged 32, is a medical assistant, specialised in assisting with childbirth. She works both in a public health department and a private clinic, as well as heading the women's section of her union based in Tihama (approximately 100 km south of the capital Sana'a). She insists on the importance of education programmes in the fight to eradicate poverty and emancipate women.

What is the situation of women working in the health sector in Yemen?

They face a great deal of discrimination. Pay inequalities are common, and when it comes to promotions, men are given priority. Even the women who are highly qualified come up against obstacles. It's the same in trade unions, although now, thanks to our efforts to raise awareness and to make men understand that women are just as capable, we have managed to get 35 women elected as trade union leaders in my region, to represent the 1500 women union members here.

How did you get involved in trade union activities?

I have been a member of the health sector union since 1992. Two years ago, thanks to the first elections held in the union (previously the posts were allocated by appointment), I was elected as the head of the women's section, a position I was re-elected to a few months ago. From 1992 to 1997, I participated in setting up an education programme funded by our national union, offering training in the area of health to Yemeni women as a way to strengthen the situation of women in our country. Along with the diploma they obtain at the end of the education programme, the women also receive an assurance from the government that they will find a job.

What are the main obstacles to higher rates of women's participation in the labour market and trade unions?

The basic problem is the level of education, which is really very low. The rate of illiteracy among women is terrible (over 70% in rural areas). The extreme poverty makes access to education difficult for the girls from the less developed regions. They are also constrained by traditional and conservative attitudes. Education is really our number one concern. In 2003 and 2004, we organised nine seminars - with the support of aid organisations - to develop the occupational skills of men and women in a whole range of sectors.

The immense poverty is also at the root of child labour, which is a very widespread problem in Yemen. Children are sometimes employed to do very dangerous work, such as handling hazardous chemicals, for example. Some are also the victims of child traffickers who take them to Saudi Arabia, where they are subjected to all kinds of abuse.

To come back to the place of women in society, we are starting to see some positive developments. There are more women getting involved, for example, in politics, although they are still a very small minority. Out of the three million women in Yemen there is only one female minister!

Is your union carrying out activities specifically aimed at women in the informal economy?

Yes, in my region we have set up committees targeting women in the informal economy, to encourage them to unionise. The committees organise initiatives to raise women's awareness of their rights, encouraging them to express themselves freely, to voice their needs. Based on the demands they formulate, we help them, for example, to better organise the production and marketing of their handicrafts. This has proved to be a very successful way of motivating them to unionise.

In practical terms, how do the women manage to take part in trade union activities at the same time as fulfilling the family responsibilities that fall unequally on their shoulders?

I am widow, I only have one little girl, so it's not so difficult for me to meet my trade union responsibilities alongside my work and family responsibilities. But it's true that for many women it is very difficult. That's why we hold our workshops during the afternoon, as it's easier for the women to organise themselves to do their work in the morning and to fulfil their family responsibilities. It's vital that we take on board the constraints on women, to make it as easy as possible for them to take part. Many of them have to organise things well in advance so that they can come; they prepare for our meetings as if they were going to a party. Nonetheless, the number of women taking part remains very low. There is still a long way to go... The regions should also be given the same opportunities. The activities are too centralised, too focused on Sana'a, whilst the other regions are somewhat neglected.

Interview by Natacha David

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 233 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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