

ICFTU OnLine...

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Violence and political instability fails to stop worldwide celebrations of International Women's Day

Brussels, 8 March 2005 (ICFTU Online): Despite the dwindling respect for human rights in Nepal, a sharp rise in anti-trade union violence directed towards women in Colombia and the violent reaction of police to a demonstration calling for equal rights for women in Turkey, millions of women across the world are expected to turn out in force to mark International Women's Day (8 March 2005). With gender pay differentials hampering the ability of women to climb out of poverty, the international trade union movement said it would be putting its weight behind initiatives to combat the fact that women make up 70% of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty.

Global employment trends show that 2.8 billion people were at work in 2003 and 39% (or 1.1 billion) of these were women - a higher proportion than ever before. Whilst the ICFTU welcomes this statistic, it highlighted that women increasingly face obstacles at work. Employment opportunities are opening up for women however the best paid jobs are overwhelmingly reserved for men.

In developing countries, women's employment tends to be in specific sectors such as textiles (*) - 80% of employees in Bangladesh's textile sector are women - and in agriculture. Lacking regular paid employment, earning less money than men for similar work and deprived of social protection, women make up 60% (or 330 million) of the world's working poor. The issue of poverty is at the centre of a new campaign - the Global Call to Action against Poverty (www.whiteband.org) - in which the ICFTU is participating together with women's groups and other non-governmental organizations.

Women also face challenges at work in industrialised countries - for example, female nurses earn 10% less than their male counterparts for the same work in the US, said the ICFTU in its report "Great Expectations - Mixed Results" (<http://www.icftu.org/www/pdf/FinalBrochureGreatexpectationsmixedresults2005.pdf>). Furthermore, there is a 25% discrepancy between men's and women's wages in France because women are concentrated in certain sectors and generally work part-time. The report is being released to coincide with the review of the gains made since the UN's women's conference held in Beijing in 1995 which developed a programme for action with a strong focus on women's rights at work.

The ICFTU, which in December 2004 elected Sharan Burrow as its first ever woman President and set a progressive target of 25% female participation on its Executive Board (the ICFTU's decision making body), also released statistics on the successes of its campaign which aims to increase trade union representation of women, particularly in the informal economy and in export processing zones (EPZs). The "Unions for Women, Women for Unions" campaign has been notably successful in Africa, including in Benin, Ivory Coast and Mauritania. For example, the ICFTU's Mauritanian affiliate, the CGTM, increased their female membership by 30% in the space of 6 months. Similar progress is being made in Peru, Uganda and a number of other countries.

Women in trade unions in Colombia, however, had far less positive news to report - the country has seen an increase in the proportion of violence against women trade unionists - there were 156 death threats made against women in 2004, 12 were assassinated and 7 were detained arbitrarily. At the annual Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), currently taking place in New York, the ICFTU urged participants to sign a petition calling on the Colombian government to put an end to the

assassinations of trade unionists and bring the perpetrators to justice.

In Nepal, where many political leaders remain under house arrest and trade unionists in detention, the ICFTU received information that the Trade Union Committee for Gender Equality and Promotion (TUC-GEP) is planning to celebrate International Women's Day in one of the first demonstrations since the royal coup on 1st February 2005. Women will mark the day with rallies in the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu to highlight the situation of human rights, including trade union rights and women's rights. This comes after the demonstration held in Turkey on Sunday 6 March 2005, marred by violence when police brutally reacted to protesters demanding equality rights for women.

The ICFTU has published a series of interviews with women trade unionists in Algeria, (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221351>), Yemen (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221347>), Jordan (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221356>) and Peru (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221365&Language=EN>) who are working to raise female voice in trade unions, for representation of street vendors and against discriminatory government legislation including Algeria's Family Code. Click here to read them:

* 90% of Cambodia's textile and clothing workers are women who make products which are exported to the United States (two thirds of total clothing exports) and to the EU (most of the remaining share). Women are also concentrated in the textile markets of Guatemala, Mauritius and Madagascar where they suffer serious violations of workers' rights. These cases formed the backbone of two ICFTU reports published in 2004:

Disaster looms with the ending of the quota system (November 2004):
<http://www.icftu.org/www/PDF/rapporttextilEOK.pdf>

Behind the brand names (December 2004):
<http://www.icftu.org/www/PDF/EPZreportE.pdf>

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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