

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Spotlight interview with Majda Fahchouch (SNE/AOb - Morocco)

School, the best workplace for children...

Brussels, 12 June 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): In Morocco, 600,000 children aged between seven and 14 are working when they should be at school. A massive figure, particularly when added to the 800,000 other children who do not attend school and do not work.

The Dutch and Moroccan trade unions, the AOb (Algemene Onderwijsbond) and the SNE (National Teachers' Union), have jointly set up a pilot project, in conjunction with other Moroccan and European partners, to fight against child labour and school non-attendance.

A teacher and presenter of a TV programme for children broadcast on the Moroccan channel 2M, Majda Fahchouch is the national coordinator of this project. She is supervising the activities being carried out in Fez, where the pilot project is being implemented. She tells us about the project's aims and initial results.

Why was Fez chosen as the pilot town for this project?

Fez, being the spiritual capital of Morocco, was quick to emerge as the obvious setting for this project. We considered it important to associate this town with the launch of the project, as the symbol of a campaign promoting school attendance. The focus is being placed on the children's families. Any hope of success depends on the families joining in the spirit of the project.

In addition to the activities within schools, we are also raising general awareness about the importance of education, and identifying the factors hindering the schooling of their children.

The project is tackling the phenomenon of "de-schoolarisation" in order to fight against child labour. Could you explain the logic behind this approach?

Our project is focused on four areas of action: the school, the family, lobbying and capacity building. The school, of course, is central to our strategy.

Consequently, we identified five schools in Fez that we could work with for a three-year period. A working group has been set up for each school, in order to implement and evaluate the activities. The strategy consists of preventing child labour by attacking one of the main causes, which is school non-attendance. So our efforts are not directly focused on working children.

We are in direct contact with between 3500 and 4500 primary school children aged between seven and 12 years at schools in the poor areas of Fez. They are children at risk: it wouldn't take much for them to drop out of school. The boys are more at risk of dropping out than the girls. In this context, the role of the teacher and the family is crucial.

How do you approach the families?

The general idea is to raise awareness. Poverty obviously has a major impact on school drop out rates, but there is also, above all, a lack of awareness about how important schooling is for children. Our activities have been designed to reach different types of families: divorced parents, poor families, families taking care of orphaned children, elderly parents.

We organise workshops and information sessions targeting such families, to explain the importance of education. We also help them to confront the difficulties that stand in the way of their children's education.

Finally, we organise training sessions to explain children's rights.

As part of our approach, we particularly target, as they are the pillars of education within families.

How do you develop teachers' awareness of this issue?

First of all, efforts have to be made to make school an attractive place for children. The Moroccan education system has been lacking in this respect for many years. The teaching profession attracts ever fewer young people, which means there is a shortage of teachers, particularly in rural areas. In some regions there are no longer any schools. The situation is quite paradoxical, because there are qualified teachers who are unemployed and unable to find work.

The school curriculum also needs to be revised in order to motivate the pupils and make them understand the importance of studying. The teachers should also be trained to detect the risk of a child dropping out of school. Our workshops and training session include work with a sociology professor, who helps the teachers improve their ability to prevent children from dropping out of school.

Do the teachers have close links with the families?

Increasing numbers of teachers are trying to initiate relations with their pupils' families. One of the teachers told me that he had gone into the neighbourhood to look for a pupil who had dropped out of school. This kind of work is voluntary, it doesn't form part of the teachers' responsibilities and is not remunerated. Nonetheless, voluntary initiatives like these make the project more dynamic.

Could you give us some indication of the project's initial results?

The school drop-out rate is falling. We have registered 120 dropouts in the five schools. We have also been able to reintegrate 17 children within the education system. The education support programmes have also been quite successful and the attendance rate is rising. Finally, we have also been able to obtain glasses for 200 children.

What, in your view, are the causes of school non-attendance in Morocco?

Poverty is clearly not the only reason behind this phenomenon. People are not dying of starvation in Morocco. So I think it has more to do with ignorance. That's why the main focus of our work is information and awareness raising. People must understand the importance of education.

Even if people are poor, it is essential that their children be sent to school to improve their situation.

But, children are sometimes encouraged to stay at home to perform domestic tasks...

Indeed, in every Moroccan family you will find a little maid. Sometimes they are not even seven years old. Domestic work can be a very heavy task for children of that age. But this phenomenon doesn't prick the conscience of Moroccan families or the government. We are used to it, it's rooted in our culture. That's the worst thing.

Our project isn't aimed at this target group, but others are organising information campaigns on the issue.

How prevalent is child prostitution in Morocco?

It's a recent phenomenon and is relatively taboo. It seems that Morocco has been particularly affected over the last two years, like many other tourist destinations.

Given that the problem is only recent, awareness-raising activities are gradually being organised.

Interview by Pierre Martinot.

Also read the Spotlight Interview with Mohamed MDAGHR (AOB - Netherlands) entitled, "The Moroccan community in Europe is an essential ally in the fight against child labour in Morocco".

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