



The informal economy: women on the front line

Informal employment is on the rise throughout the world, including in developed countries, and is synonymous with lack of protection and serious vulnerability.

Women are discriminated against and edged out of the formal labour market, but are over-represented in the informal economy. On 8 March, International Women's Day, the ICFTU will be focusing on organising women in the informal economy so that they can gain better rights and become a driving force for trade union recruitment.

Women home workers in the textile industry in Algeria, Brazil or the USA, street vendors in India or Moldova, freelance hairdressers in Ghana, peasant farmers in Peru, domestic child-minders in Croatia and fish-sellers in Chad all have their tale to tell as trade unionists. The fundamental trade union principle of solidarity is at stake, but so is the very survival of the trade union movement worldwide.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) points out that the globalisation of trade has been accompanied by the rampant spread of the informal economy, which affects 50 to 75% of workers in developing countries, excluding those employed in agriculture, and 30% of workers in the European Union (pre-enlargement EU, made up of 15 Member States). According to ICFTU, 25% of the world's working population are active in the informal economy and generate 35% of global GDP.

According to the ILO's Global Employment Trends 2004, the informal economy develops in countries which experience low growth rates, yet the number of 'poor workers', i.e. those earning a dollar or less per day, remained stable in 2003 (550 million people).

The debt crisis faced by developing countries, privatisation, the deregulation of labour markets (especially within the framework of structural adjustment programmes), the drop in the number of full-time employees, reloca-



Women are over-represented in the informal economy. Two-thirds of the female active population in developing countries work in the informal economy, and the proportion is as high as 84% in sub-Saharan Africa.
(Photo: ILO)

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tions and the development of sub-contracting have all fuelled the spread of more precarious and less well protected forms of work (such as occasional work, temporary work, part-time work, contract work, work on demand, and so on).

In the 1970s, the 'informal economy' was distinct from the formal economy, depending on whether the work was done by an employee or on a freelance basis, and according to the size and type of the company in question. This phenomenon was thought to be a temporary one, the argument being that it was associated with one developmental phase of a country. However, the phenomenon has turned out to be anything but transient; in fact it is positively booming, including in developed industrialised countries.

The term now used is 'informal economy', even though there is no longer a clear distinction between a formal and an informal economy; both concepts are viewed along the same continuum. For instance, some informal workers who work in very small groups, without social protection, may

be subcontractors of entirely 'formal' major companies. Informal work is regarded as an integral part of the chain of production, associated more with the lack of rights and social protection than with the kind of company involved.

So informal work is a form of labour relations which is not recognised (or protected) by law. It is work without a formal employment contract, with no social benefits and no social protection. Workers in the formal economy may hold the status of self-employed, employee, neither or both. The informal economy relates to the world of micro-companies, self-employed persons and home workers.

UNPROTECTED WORKERS

Informal workers are not protected, recognised or represented and may even treated as a professional pariah. Without protection, informal workers are highly vulnerable and they have no bargaining power vis-à-vis their employer, especially since the employer-employee relationship has become extremely unclear.

Women are over-represented in the informal economy. Two-thirds of the female active population in developing

countries work in the informal economy, and the proportion is as high as 84% in sub-Saharan Africa. More than 90% of female agricultural workers in India and Indonesia, 80% of female agricultural workers in Peru, and more than 40% of female workers in South Korea work in the informal economy.

The degree of women's involvement in the informal economy has definitely been underestimated. Women often work in small units where their contribution is invisible and therefore not taken into account (for instance, production for personal consumption, domestic work carried out in private homes, homeworking, and so on). Indeed women who are self-employed are often working for themselves, whereas when they are employed in the informal economy, their employers are usually men.

Trade union opinions on this issue are divided. Some believe that there are still too many sectors in the formal economy which non unionised and that the benefits of unionising informal workers are too meagre to make it worthwhile. Other union centres maintain that unionising informal workers is the only way of halting the steady decline in membership.

Women in the informal economy have been unionised in two different ways- either a particular union or federation has extended its scope of attention to include workers in the informal economy, or such workers have set up their own trade unions (2).

UNIONISATION OF FEMALE WORKERS AT HOME

Trade unions which represent workers in the Australian and Canadian textile industry - (TCFUA) and (UNITE) respectively - have taken steps to unionise home workers in their sector.

In Ghana, organisations in the woodworking sector (Timber and Woodworkers' Union) and agricultural sector (General Agricultural Workers' Union) have unionised craftsmen and smallholders respectively (see article on page 5). In Uganda, the civil servants' trade union, faced with the dismantling of public services, has unionised street vendors.

The national trade union centre in Hong Kong (HKCTU) set up a union for domestic workers in July 2001 (Hong Kong Domestic Workers' Union).

In Switzerland, a new trade union was set up for self-employed teleworkers in January 2002 with the backing of the SIB (Syndicat industrie et bâtiment), which represents industrial and construction workers.

The Moldavian national trade union centre CITUM is deeply committed to the unionisation of workers in the informal economy (see article on page

The ILO and the informal economy

1972 – The International Labour Office published a study highlighting the emergence of groups of workers and small companies operating on the margins of the formal economy. The study referred to the 'informal sector' as a short-term phenomenon that is associated with weaker levels of development and would vanish once growth gained momentum. However, the phenomenon persisted and spread. 1991 – The ILO's International Labour Conference discussed "the dilemma of the non-structured sector", albeit without reaching a consensus. Should the informal economy be promoted as a source of jobs and income, or should attempts be made to regulate it by imposing social protection at the risk of curbing its ability to create employment? This turned out to be a false dilemma for trade unions, since the jobs concerned were 'survival jobs', far removed from

decent work.

2002 – In 2002 the International Labour Conference adopted a report entitled "Decent Work and the Informal Economy" (1). Workers and companies involved in the informal economy were defined as being "not recognised or protected under the legal and regulatory frameworks" and "characterised by a high degree of vulnerability". Far from representing decent work, jobs in the informal economy are "poor-quality, unproductive jobs characterised by low pay" that are "not recognised or protected by law" with an "absence of workers' rights, inadequate social protection, and the lack of representation and voice" especially at the bottom end among women and young workers." The issue here was bad governance, i.e. the failure to apply - or even total lack of - standards.

(1) ILO: Decent work and the informal economy, Report VI, International Labour Conference, 65th session, Geneva, 2002. The full report is available on the Internet at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc90/pdf/rep-vi.pdf>

13), and the trade union set up for street vendors and home workers in 1999 now has close to 40,000 members.

In Central and Eastern Europe, on 4 October 2003 the International Women's Trade Union Institute in Rovinj, adopted a Declaration on the Informal Economy (see box on page 12) which made several dozen proposals to the employers, governments and unions.

For several years, one trade union has been unionising embroidery home workers on the island of Madeira, and now has around 8,000 members. Such work is almost exclusively done by women..

In Brazil, the confederation Força Sindical is unionising home workers. In Peru nearly all trade union centres represent workers in the informal economy.

CAMPAIGN IN THE MAGHREB REGION

In Burkina Faso, the National Organisation of Free Trade Unions (ONLS) participated in the unionisation of informal women workers by setting up the association Cissin-Natanga in 1985. This initially started out as a group of women participating a course designed to boost literacy who have since opened up training centres.

In the Maghreb region, UGTA (Algeria) and UMT (Morocco) have launched a campaign to unionise women, particularly targeting the informal economy (see article on page 8).

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was one of the first organisations for informal workers unionised themselves, set up in India in 1972. SEWA is a women's cooperative and trade union, and has set up its own cooperative bank offering micro-loans, a trade union training programme and production and service cooperatives (see page 14).

In South Africa, the Self-Employed Women's Union (SEWU) was set up in 1993 along the same lines as the SEWA. Its main members are female street vendors. SEWU heads up Streetnet International and is affiliated to Union Network International (UNI).

NETWORKS OF NGOS AND TRADE UNIONS

Workers' organisations have also been sent up in Hong Kong, Indonesia, the Republic of Korea, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines and Turkey, some of which are on the verge of becoming unions.

In the 1990s, various networks of unions and NGOs were set up, encouraged by the pioneering experience of SEWA in 1972. Homenet (1994) met the needs of home workers, Streetnet (1995)



Women's contribution to the informal economy is often invisible.
(Photo: ILO)

catered for street vendors, and in 1997 the umbrella network WIEGO, which stands for Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising (see page 16).

At the global trade union level, following its Congress in Durban in 2000, the ICFTU set up a working group devoted to the informal economy which invited unions to adopt fresh approaches in their attempts to recruit (female) workers employed in it.

In 2004, women working in the in-

formal economy will also be the focus of several worldwide trade union campaigns. ●

ANNE RENAUT

(1) See Labour Education 2002/2, no. 127, entitled "Main-d'œuvre non protégée : quel syndicalisme pour le informal economy?" (Unprotected labour: What role for unions in the informal economy?)

(2) "Organising in the informal economy", an article by Dan Gallin (Global Labour Institute) published in Labour Education no. 127, ILO-ACTRAV, Geneva, 2002

Trade union campaigns focus on workers in the informal economy

Women working in the informal economy are the focus of three global union campaigns in 2004.

Firstly, on this year's International Women's Day on 8 March, ICFTU and the various international industry federations (a coalition of global unions). As part of the Global Unions Organising Campaign "**Unions for women, women for unions**", a season of action will be launched on 8 March which target women workers in the Informal economy and the Export Processing Zones.

After that on Labour Day on 1 May 2004, the coalition of global unions will highlight the need for "**respect**" for

women workers (i.e. the need to respect their rights, the need to respect them as working women and the need to respect those working in poverty). Finally, on 4 March 2004, together with Oxfam International and the Clean Clothes Campaign, the global unions will launch a five-month campaign to straddle this year's Olympic Games in Athens. The aim of the campaign is to defend women's rights in the sports textile industry ("**Play fair**"), by publishing a report on the situation faced by unprotected women.

For more information about the Global Unions Organising Campaign "Unions for Women, Women for Unions" Campaign, contact: equality@icftu.org or look at the website campaign: <http://www.icftu.org/focus.asp?Issue=u4w&Language=EN>

For Campaign materials and the 'unions4women' email list.

Benin: already 42 unions operating in the informal economy

In Benin, as elsewhere, organising informal workers is still a difficult task, owing to the lack of structure and the seemingly independent spirit inherent to the informal economy. Yet the fact remains that these workers are also directly affected by the decisions taken by political and economic decision makers. It is therefore just as important for them to unite to defend themselves. In Benin, as elsewhere, women appear to be the most affected: poverty and informal work often has a female face. Siméon Dossou of the confederation of independent trade unions, the CSA, quotes the findings of a local survey according to which "95% of the country's working population is concentrated in the informal economy, whilst only 5% are employed in the formal economy or private sector. There is not a marked difference between men and women - 52% women and 48% men. 30% of the formal workforce is organised".

To make progress with organising informal workers, it is important that they themselves realise the benefits to be gained from affiliating to an organisation. As Bonaventure Ahitcheme, General Secretary of one of Benin's motorcycle taxi drivers' unions, explains, "It is generally when they themselves have a problem with the authorities that they realize it might be useful to organise."

Health, retirement, disability

"In Cotonou," explains Sonon Tchéhouéa, "only 15% of the population has access to social security; the remaining 85% have nothing. They may die as a result of lack of access to medication, they don't have access to retirement benefits, and would be left to spend the rest of their lives penniless if it weren't for their children who decide to take care of them." Mr Tchéhouéa is well aware these problems, being the President of the Mutuelle de sécurité sociale pour les travailleurs du secteur informel de Cotonou (Social Security Mutual Insurance Fund of the Informal Workers of Cotonou).

This mutual insurance fund provides informal workers with health coverage (70 to 90% depending



Bonaventure Ahitcheme, general secretary of one of Benin's motorcycle taxi drivers' unions, explains, "It is generally when they themselves have a problem with the authorities that they realize it might be useful to organise." (Photo: Infosud)

The story of SYNAGETIB (the customs officers' and forwarding agents'

on the type of healthcare), a pension that is transferable to the widow, and disability insurance. Access to these benefits is subject to certain conditions: access to the pension fund, for example, is subject to 15 years of contributions to the fund. The mutual insurance fund is jointly managed by the state, which provides financial backing, as well as the various workers' organisations. It has 719 members (November 2003), which is not yet sufficient to ensure its financial autonomy. One regulation is that registration and affiliation fees are lower for workers grouped into associations. At its inception, in 1999, the mutual insurance fund grouped 18 associations. By November 2003 these amounted to 98.

union of Benin) confirms this analysis. According to Laure Hounwanou, secretary for women's affairs, "It was when the authorities threatened to get rid of our profession, providing us with no employment alternative, that our association became a union. CSA Benin helped us to organise, to defend our cause, and convince the authorities to backtrack. The union is now seven years old."

TIME IS MORE THAN JUST MONEY

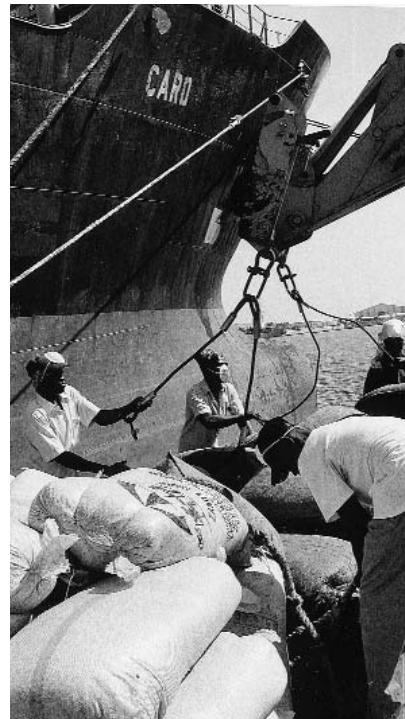
Indeed, there are some concrete issues that need to be dealt with, such as the absence of social protection, lack of access to credit, red tape, lack of management training, difficulty purchasing equipment, and so on.

Although the idea is gaining ground, the example of Benin illustrates that organising informal workers is far from easy in the real world. In Siméon Dossou's view, "The obstacles are to be found in excessive individualism, poverty, and the resulting preoccupation with short-term survival, as well as mobility from one job and one place to another." For example, the great mobility of women street vendors means it is far more difficult for them to unite relative to their counterparts in the markets.

As Laure Hounwanou also points out, "We are informal workers, so we do not receive wages. Women workers often point out that they earn nothing during the time spent on union activities, and yet they live hand to mouth. To them, time is money. And my response to my colleagues is that we are part of a union not only for the money but also for the knowledge it brings us, and the sharing of ideas that makes us stronger... I try to raise their awareness, and they usually come round."

"Ten years ago, we embarked on an awareness raising drive, with the assistance of ICFTU/ORAF, targeted at informal workers who had already showed interest in organising," Siméon Dossou explains. "That is how trade-based associations were born, initially out of the need for greater solidarity. We then broached the issue of unionisation and structure. The awareness-raising phase took two years and was a nationwide campaign. There are currently 42 trade unions for informal workers; each union is affiliated to one of the national confederations."

Organising informal workers has become a major concern for most international union movements as well as for the unions in developing countries. In addition to being of capital importance for the welfare of these workers who tend to be isolated, organising the unorganised is essential for the future of trade union organisations, who are often criticised for not representing these workers.



Customs agents working at the port of Cotonou are now unionised.
(Photo: J.D.)

RECOGNISED NEGOTIATION AT LONG LAST

Most unions that participated in the 1999 ILO Conference on trade unions and the informal economy are already implementing policies which target at these workers. The conference high-

lighted a reality that is not always understood in Western nations: to appeal to informal workers, unions need to review their approach and even they way they are organised, in an effort to better respond to the needs of these workers (1). For instance, by drawing on relationships outside the work place too. "Our organising method includes a sentimental, family, and village-based approach aimed at capitalising on the relations that already exist between people," explains Siméon Dossou.

But the women are often harder to involve, as we first have to convince them that unions are also a woman's concern. As Laure Hounwanou points out, "A woman is not as free once she is married. She needs her husband's permission to attend meetings. If he refuses, and she is not strong enough, she simply won't go. Yet if she were made sufficiently aware, she would be able to convince him that it is in her own interest."

Although much remains to be done, the following observation made by Siméon Dossou shows how much has already been achieved: "The government currently has to address the demands of various negotiating partners as part of the social dialogue: those of the public sector, the private sector and the informal workers. We have become recognised negotiating partners." ●

ANDRÉ LINARD - INFO SUD - BELGIUM

(1) See also Labour Education, no. 127, 2002: "Unprotected Labour: What role for unions in the informal economy?" (Actrav - ILO)

Ghana: trade union give support to female rural workers and hairdressers

The Ghana Trades Union Congress (GTUC) has been organising informal female workers in the agricultural sector and its Commerce union has an affiliated association of hairdressers and beauticians. The union has been providing very practical support: basic agricultural tools, credit facilities and assistance with sanitary controls in hairdressing salons.

17 unions affiliated to the Ghana Trades Union Congress (GTUC), which has 500,000 members, have been heavily involved in organising workers active in

the informal economy since 1996. 85% of the country's active population is working in the informal economy, including 60% near towns or cities. The GTUC's membership rate from that sector is under 10%.

"Three factors have motivated our work in this area: solidarity with workers from the informal economy who are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged of all, the considerable fall in our membership and the growing similarity between working conditions in the formal economy and in the informal economy, as a result of the rise of the informal economy", explains Francis Owuvi, officer in charge of the informal economy at the GTUC (1).

The GTUC affiliates have either chosen to recruit these workers from their own structures or to recognise and affil-

iate associations working in the informal economy. "We have had to find new ways of organising these people. Some unions have, for example, managed to gain the trust of communities and markets by voluntarily solving problems with the local authorities. They have taken initiatives without knowing what they themselves would get out of it," states Mr. Owuvi.

ILLITERATE WOMEN

The GTUC does not, in fact, expect these workers to pay regular union fees "because they would then need to have a regular income, and regular wages are hard to obtain for such workers. Our approach was based more on the principle of the strongest helping the weakest," according to Mr. Owuvi.

◀ CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

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This has enabled the Ghanaian unions to provide assistance to female agricultural workers. Most agricultural work in Ghana is done by women over 30, often illiterate, who turn the manioc into 'gari' (a form of cereal), brew palm wine or the local drink 'pito', or make soap. They are generally married with children and receive no form of social protection.

The General Agricultural Workers' Union (GAWU) began organising its rural workers' branch (RWOD) in 1979. Two-thirds of its members are women agricultural labourers, along with hired workers, tractor drivers, quarry workers and assorted independent workers.

SEWING MACHINES

"These workers have not shown any objection to trade unions but just want to know what kind of benefits they can get from them. The problem is that if you take them along to meetings they are not able to work during that time and so are not paid anything," explains Veronika Kofie, former head of the International Department of the GTUC (2).

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The GAWU helps its members by offering them renewable credit and providing them with some basic tools and other implements, such as lamps and petrol. In the uplands of Eastern Ghana, the GAWU was able to provide one group of women with some sewing machines, so that they could make clothes for their families. The union is also constructing buildings for storing goods and classrooms for teaching reading and writing to its members. It provides some basic education and training courses.

"Over the years, thanks to support from the FNV and the Global Union



Veronika Kofie, former head of the International Department of the GTUC. (Photo: ICFTU)

Federations (GUFs) we have managed to set up a system for training female rural workers in craftwork, baking bread, livestock rearing, bee-keeping, and so on, thereby helping them to earn a little money outside the rainy season, which is harvest time in Ghana", explains Mrs. Kofie.

Union members also ask the GAWU for advice on bargaining, for example when they are buying land and the union is prepared to provide legal support to its members when required.

But rural workers still do not get any social protection, a guaranteed income, annual leave, a minimum wage or health services. Owing to the low wages in the agricultural sector the union actually spends more in recruiting rural workers than it can hope to receive in union fees.

NEGOTIATIONS

For its part, the Ghanaian Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), which is affiliated to the GTUC, has managed to affiliate the Hairdressers and Beauticians' Association (GHABA).

The association has kept its own structure but diverts a proportion of its fees to the ICU and has three representatives on the ICU's national executive committee and its women's committee.

GHABA does not receive any direct financial support from the ICU, however the ICU covers secretarial costs and the organisation of conferences, and provides some legal support to members. The ICU organises seminars on key aspects of trade unionism as well as on accounting, health and safety and cus-

tomer protection. As the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union, it also negotiates with the National Taxation Office and the Accra City Council on issues such as tax rates and rental fees for hairdressing salons.

GHABA maintains that working conditions vary considerably from one salon to the next in terms of their materials, products, furniture, sanitary facilities, working environment and health and safety situation. The working conditions of its members have improved somewhat since they joined the union. They now carry gloves when handling chemicals and ventilation has also

been improved in the salons. GHABA also organises examinations for people wishing to set up their own salons.

NOT A PAINLESS PROCESS

With the support of the public authorities, the association has established a regulation whereby hairdressing salons must be at least 50 metres apart from one another. The members of the GHABA executive committee regularly visit their members' salons to ensure that the buildings are clean, that there are sufficient numbers of combs and towels and that the products used are appropriate.

However, "organising GHABA has not been a painless process. Some problems with internal democracy and demands have partially tested the trust and motivation of the members," states GTUC General Secretary Kwasi Adu-Amankwah (3).

The ICU has also recruited workers specialised in colouring of knotted batik materials and has even set up a sales office at the GTUC head office in order to help them sell their products. ●

A.R.

(1) Speech at a workshop organised in January 2003 by the FNV and the WIEGO network (Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising) with the title "From marginal work to core business: European trade unions organising in the informal economy".

(2) Interview by the ICFTU as published on its website www.icftu.org on 11 June 2002.

(3) Extract from a report by the GTUC General Secretary on "Unions in the non-structured sector" for StreetNet International (www.streetnet.org.za).

Africa: meeting between women street vendors and municipal employees

Public Services International (PSI) and its Women's Committee are committed to organising female workers who are active in the informal economy. In Africa, PSI has cooperated with the NGO StreetNet in organising a meeting between women working as street vendors and as municipal employees.

“Street vendors are prepared to pay taxes to the local authorities but they need to get something in return,” stressed Juliana Brown Afari, the representative of the Ghanaian Association of Street Vendors. Suzan Sekhonyane, speaking on behalf of South African municipal workers, explained that municipal workers, on the other hand, are often held responsible for a situation which is not of their own making.

So what forms of alliance can be formed between municipal workers' unions and street vendors' associations? That was the basic question that PSI and the NGO StreetNet, an international organisation representing street vendors, tried to answer at a women's workshop held in Nairobi on 21 September 2003, attended by representatives from around 10 African countries.

Both organisations felt cooperation could be possible in various areas, though particularly on lack of funding (owing to poor and irregular income), sexual harassment and political harassment.

“Women workers in the informal economy primarily want recognition and protection, through law and within society, and to receive secure wages. They also want access to markets, credit and social security. And finally, they would like to be represented directly in collective bargaining”, stressed Pat Horn, international coordinator of StreetNet.

JOINT CAMPAIGNS

Conflicts can arise between street vendors and the local authorities over issues such as the expulsion of vendors and confiscation of their goods, the imposition of taxes, poor street hygiene, delinquency on the streets, and the transferral of local authority jobs to the informal economy.

To tackle these issues, PSI and StreetNet suggested setting up negotiations



For better recognition, greater revenue, improved access to the markets and credit... (Photo: ILO)

with trade union leaders or the local authorities on issues such as town planning or regulation of street-based commerce, promoting greater awareness on both sides, organising joint meetings with national governments, launching joint publicity campaigns about municipal services, and organising joint meetings with leading proprietors.

According to Nora Wintour, Equality and Rights Officer at PSI, by forging alliances with this type of NGO, PSI affiliates are able — to “exert pressure for improvements on all aspects of water supplies, health services, rubbish collection and security at markets. Such improvements will be good for the vendors and also for their customers and may also promote employment in the public sector”.

COOPERATIVES

This type of alliance has also had a positive impact on trade union membership, according to several participants from Tanzania, Guinea and Ghana.

E l i z a b e t h Migongwa, of the Tanzanian Union of Industrial and Commercial Workers (TUICO), explained that she had started by organising meetings of women in the informal economy to discuss health and safety issues, and that she had subsequently helped them to obtain micro-credit facilities and training courses in management skills. She also advised them against adopting political stances so as not to divide themselves. These women are now members of the union.

Fatoumata Bah and Mariama Kaba, of the CNTG (Confédération nationale des travailleurs de Guinée), explained that they had en-

couraged Guinean women working in the informal economy to form cooperatives. They described the many types of cooperative created, including one providing market cleaning services which organises recycling of waste products that are then used by gardeners in the informal economy, and various examples in the production industry (e.g. soap and charcoal factories, and so on).

Juliana Brown-Afari, of the Makola Market Union in Accra (Ghana), explained that her organisation had linked up with the Accra city authority and street vendors in order to settle disputes between street and market vendors and to improve regulation of informal trading in the city of Accra in the mid-term. ●

A.R. (WITH PSI)

The Maghreb: a decline in women's rights in the informal economy

Take three types of employees: young maids in Morocco, textile workers in Algeria and agricultural workers in Mauritania. At first glance, they may not seem to have anything in common yet what links these women together is that they are working in the informal economy. In other words, they totally lack legal protection. Their rights (to maternity leave, social security and a decent wage) are flouted. Furthermore, working at home or in closed workshops keeps them tightly bound to their traditional gender roles. In January 2004, the women's organisations in these countries, the UGTA (General Union of Algerian Workers, UMT (Moroccan Labour Union) and CGTM (General Confederation of Mauritanian Workers), launched a campaign (1) to unionise women, particularly targeting those employed in the informal econo-

According to the ILO, the rate of unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa lies at 12.2% (2003), largely due to in-depth restructuring public sector employment and a steep increase in the active population. One consequence of this high rate of unemployment is the development of the informal economy, especially in privatised sectors such as the textile sector.

In Algeria, many textile workers are now active in the informal economy following the implementation of a policy to dismantle the public sector and as a result of market liberalisation triggered by the IMF's structural adjustment plans in 1994. Morocco is also faced with IMF adjustment plans which have led to large-scale redundancies and the spread of atypical forms of work in which women are over-represented. Finally, in Mauritania, informal work by women is particularly widespread in the agricultural sector and is accompanied by extreme forms of poverty.

TRADITIONAL STATUS

Soumia Salhi, the only woman on the UGTA's National Executive, believes women need to be unionised, especially in view of the fact that they currently represent 17% of salaried workers in Algeria. In addition, she is aware of the need to protect women working in the informal economy, where they are deprived of their rights and they are constrained to fulfilling a traditional role.

In Algeria, the private sector and the informal economy "are developing rapidly and are synonymous with a tragic decline in working conditions, failure to apply labour codes, a lack of social security and of course the absence of trade union rights", points out Ms Salhi.

Women, who make up a large contingent in the informal economy, most notably in the textile and service sectors and "are losing fundamental rights, such as maternity leave (14 weeks of paid leave, depending on the labour laws), the right to retire where the law allows us to take early retirement, the



Female fishmongers on the beach in Nouatchott. (Photo: ICFTU)

right to family allowances and the protection of a trade union balance of power", she continues.

The UGTA has launched a campaign in the textile sector to target the factories in question which are scattered across the country. In this way, the union is able to involve a maximum number of structures and to "prepare the way" for trade unions in the private and informal economy.

In negotiations with the government and employers' organisations in October 2003, the UGTA made further progress towards combatting undeclared work. However, increasingly precarious working conditions have made this task all the more complex. Soumia Salhi also concedes that the UGTA is re-

luctant to support the policy of aid for micro-enterprises, as proposed by the World Bank, since that "is having a dismantling effect on the formal economy", and she reminds that "we must strive to ensure that this formal economy remains the norm".

YOUNG DOMESTIC MAIDS

According to Amal El Amri, Chair of the UMT's Women's Committee, around 60% of Moroccans work in the informal economy. This "ranges from unrecognised work, such as domestic work, and jobs on agricultural plantations which are totally informal, to sectors completely ignored by the authorities because, behind locked doors, there are workers living beyond the

reach of the law. [...] Therefore, there are semi-formal production units where employees are not declared for social security reasons, have no work permit or aren't being paid the minimum wage", she stressed.

In Tangiers, Casablanca and as in other towns and cities, be it relating to the agri-food or concerning the textile sectors, the phenomenon is likely to spread even further as more companies relocate and the use of subcontracting becomes all the more common. "All companies are on the lookout for the cheapest labour. These companies are capitalising by exploiting labour rights and the workers in question have no security or safety net whatsoever", Ms El Amri continues.

One frequently cited example in Morocco is that of domestic maids, whose existence has become all the more widespread ever since women were integrated into the labour market. The young girls in question, some of whom are mere children, come from highly impoverished rural areas and work without protection in the homes of working Moroccan women.

The UGTA intends to collaborate with NGOs on the issue of domestic work in an effort to define a specific law because at present the Moroccan Labour Code regards domestic work to be an exception to the rule. "However, the problem won't be solved by prohibiting it. There is serious progress to be made here, so working together with NGOs is extremely important. Mandatory schooling needs to be accompanied by specific measures. For instance, we must help the parents in question to start earning and find a way to subsidise education", explains Amal El Amri.



Mahjouba Mint Saleck, the CGTM's executive secretary responsible for women's affairs.

The UMT has also participated in the drafting of the new Labour Code which contains provisions to combat the 'informalisation' of work and to bring the country's legislation into line with ILO conventions like those concerning maternity leave and the minimum age for work.

The UMT, whose membership comprises just 12% women, must also curb the tendency of its members to leave the union. This is associated with the closure of unprofitable factories, mass redundancies which have led to the spread of atypical forms of work that are difficult to unionise, such as part-time work, temporary work and subcontracting. Furthermore, people are wary of joining a union since they know that even in the most strongly unionised sectors, trade union leaders can be sacked by the companies employing them.

OPENING THE DOOR

In Mauritania, the CGTM, which dominates the formal economy, intends "to open the door" to the informal economy.

"The informal economy employs at least one third of the working population in Mauritania. There are a great many craft cooperatives, and women in the agricultural sector who sell vegetables, make couscous, are gardeners and work solely for their family, are lacking social protection. They are afraid of unions, which they associate with the state", explains Mahjouba Mint Saleck, the CGTM's Executive Secretary responsible for women's affairs.

"In the Trarza region, where we set up our first regional women's committee, the results have been satisfactory. For example there are unemployed female agricultural technicians, so we have tried to help them find out how they could lease some land, secure funding, find suitable premises and even set up a cooperative", she continues.

The CGTM is also advising women to "help them to defend themselves" before court, especially divorced women with dependent children. The confederation is also prepared to place them in other jobs where they can be protected. ●

ANNE RENAUT

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1 The activities organised within the campaign will be based on the Arabic translation of ICFTU's unionisation campaign manual (<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991214786>). The main aim of the campaign is to boost women's affiliation rate by 5% this year by targeting women in the informal economy and export processing zones.

Chad: female fish vendors unite

Female fish vendors in Chad are often short of equipment or find themselves harassed by the authorities to pay their taxes. They recently created a union (affiliated with the UST) to help them meet their needs and protect their rights.

At the Dembé market on the outskirts of N'djaména, female fish vendors have to cope with unhygienic conditions mainly caused by changing weather conditions plus endure unlawful harassment and arrest by the authorities for tax-related matters (or because they belong to a union). These women also have to deal with the

problems involved in securing and storing supplies of fish for resale. To make matters worse, they are often illiterate.

In December 2002, these women decided to create the Union of Women Fish Vendors (SYFEVEP), affiliated with the UST (a national federation). SYFEVEP currently has 500 members, most of whom operate on the Dembé market.

"SYFEVEP aims to protect the interests of female fish vendors, to develop solidarity amongst them, fight for better fish purchase prices, and encourage socioeconomic projects designed to reduce the difficulties involved in storing and reselling fish", explains Rachel Béradinger, national coordinator for the UST Women's Committee.

The UST Women's Committee is

helping the women to organise. It runs training sessions to inform them of their rights and responsibilities, and helps identify their needs, which include storage equipment, transport to secure the supply of fish, and better display equipment. These female vendors also seek access to micro-loans, the opportunity to learn how to read and would like to be able to pay taxes.

The UST has called upon the administrative and municipal authorities, and on suppliers to ensure a fair distribution of pitches, devise tax regulations and encourage an understanding between vendors and suppliers. With the help of CISL-AFRO (ICFTU's African Regional Organisation), some women have even secured loans to buy fish. ●

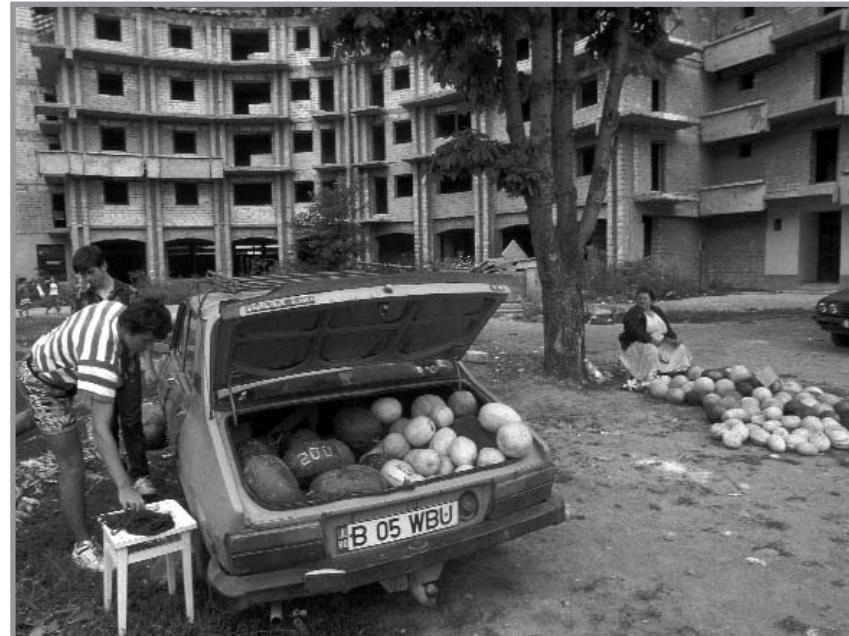
A.R.

Eastern Europe: where organising women in the informal economy is a priority

The majority of trade union members in Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States are women. Yet women are also the first victims of de-industrialisation, prompting them to work in the informal economy where they have no protection. The CEE&NIS ICFTU Women's Network is calling for trade unions to make organising women 'a priority'.

Jasna A. Petrovic, Regional Coordinator of the ICFTU CEE&NIS Women's Network and campaigner for the integration of women workers in the informal economy since December 2002, believes that trade unions need to engage in organising women. If not, she warns, these trade unions "could face an even sharper drop in their membership".

The informal economy has skyrocketed in these countries, accounting for between 10 and 70% of GDP but "governments are continuing to neglect the issue and trade unions are omitting it from their programmes", laments Ms Petrovic.



Women are the first victims of de-industrialisation in Eastern Europe.
(Photo: Gamma)

Various factors have encouraged the development of the informal economy, including massive de-industrialisation, the widespread privatisation of public sectors, liberalisation and deregulation

of labour markets, and the World Bank and IMF's structural adjustment programmes that exclude social measures. In addition, "corporate irresponsibility" prevails whilst governments "have failed to introduce adequate legislation".

Women have been hardest hit by job losses during the past 10 years of transition and now make up the majority of the informal economy's workforce.

Not by choice but out of necessity, these women take on atypical jobs such as temporary and short-term work and subcontracting. Homeworking is also dominated by women who often receive irregular piecework and are usually unregistered and unprotected. Women also make up the majority of unregistered workers in the retail trade, tourism, textiles and agriculture. These women are relatively low skilled and their illiteracy rate is very high.

"These workers often turn to trade unions for protection. They don't look to the law to protect them because that's an expensive process and it takes decades", asserts Ms Petrovic.

"Sadly, the ICFTU's women's network in these countries has shown that

Study shows that trade unions have little experience in the informal economy

A study carried out in September 2003 into trade union organisation in the informal economy on behalf of International Women's Trade Union School in Rovinj (Croatia), entitled "Women in atypical jobs and in the informal economy", showed that trade unions have little experience in the field.

"Of the 27 'women's structures' surveyed (which form part of the 27 trade union confederations in 22 countries), 16 (59.3%) said they had no experience in organising

workers in the informal economy. Only 11 said they had some experience."

The main reason given for this lack of interest in organising workers in the informal economy was that they were not a priority for trade unions; they could see no financial benefit or they lacked the funds, staff or time to work on it. Another reason was the lack of interest shown by workers in the informal economy in trade unions. Thirdly, some employers do not allow trade union organisation, and there is a distinct lack of statistical data.

A.R.

workers in this category haven't received the support and help of the region's trade unions although the latest figures reveal that most of their members are women" (according to the network they represent 50.3% of total membership in comparison to 2000's figure of 43.6%), adds Ms Petrovic.

"This is sending a clear signal to the trade union leadership; they need to pay more attention to women's interests. These figures should be seen as a warning sign because if women become increasingly disillusioned with trade unions and if they continue to move away from the structured economy and

towards the informal economy, unions in the region could face an even sharper drop in membership", she warns.

Women have been hardest hit by job losses during the past 10 years of transition and now make up the majority of the informal economy's workforce.

In response, the ICFTU CEE&NIS Women's Network decided to launch a campaign to promote the organisation

of women in the informal economy on 11 December 2002, International Human Rights Day.

"In some trade union confederations, activists have sadly lacked the support to launch such a campaign because organising this type of labour was against their regulations", laments Ms Petrovic.

Participants at the 4th International Women's Trade Union School in Rovinj, which brought together 80 women from 22 countries, adopted a Women's Declaration on the Informal Economy

☞ **CONTINUED ON PAGE 13**

Croatia: women to boost trade union membership levels

Although its membership rate is still high, the UATUC is losing members. It has therefore launched a recruitment programme that will coincide with the 2004 campaign being run by its women's section which aims to organise women who work in the informal economy.

The UATUC is one of the largest trade union confederations in South East Europe, with 300,000 affiliates. But it is currently facing with declining membership levels in a number of sectors such as trade, services, tourism and heavy industry.

Privatisation, dissatisfaction with trade unions, the war, recession and unemployment are among the main factors contributing to falling membership figures. The Croatian confederation has now placed the recruitment of new members high on its list of priorities. Its efforts will coincide with the 2004 campaign being run by its women's section to organise women working in the informal economy.

"The informal economy is one of our biggest problems. According to official statistics, 20% of the working population is employed in the informal economy, but, in reality, the figure is around 40%", explains Vesna Dejanovic, President of the UATUC.

Informal work is particularly widespread in largely 'female sectors', such as commerce, tourism, catering and health. "The percentage of informal workers in these sectors is as high as 50



Vesna Dejanovic, President of the UATUC. (Photo: ICFTU)

to 60%, which equals the proportion of women working in these sectors," points out Ms Dejanovic.

The UATUC has been "successfully cooperating" with labour inspectors in this area. "We have also started to organise these workers, telling them that if they unite they'll be better equipped to respond to their employers. Those of us in the union organised ourselves within the UATUC precisely so that we could represent all workers, even those working illegally and the unemployed," she affirms.

The UATUC unemployed persons' section was set up in 2000 and provides training to people without jobs to help them to acquire new skills. Its programme on new technologies led to the setting up of the "Elite Trade" project co-financed by the Zagreb City Council

and the Croatian Labour Ministry. This project provides informal workers who are not linked to any kind of structure with an opportunity to integrate. It also provides trade unions with a good opportunity to recruit new members.

Another part of the recruitment drive is the campaign to promote the social rights of women in the informal economy, launched by the women's section of the UATUC in 2004. The aim is to press all those concerned – the public authorities, trade unions, employers' associations and NGOs – to work towards eliminating all the factors that contribute to the development of the informal economy.

Women are the driving force of unionisation as "they are less afraid of losing their jobs, they are more courageous. They are the ones to contact the unions and who are capable of explaining things to their colleagues," says Ms Dejanovic.

The women's section receives strong support not only from its members, but also from members in the unemployed persons' section and NGOs, with whom it has been cooperating for over ten years.

For example, the local authorities of Zagreb, following an initiative of the Coordination for Gender Equality, launched a project entitled 'The Network of Kindergarten Services', in an effort to establish a formal structure for those providing childcare services in their homes. It is common for unemployed or retired women to informally provide such childcare services. The project aims to legalise their situation as well as providing ad hoc training opportunities. ●

ANNE RENAUT

Eastern European Women's declaration on the informal economy

The ICFTU-CEE & NIS Women's Network adopted on October 4 2003 a declaration on the informal economy

The women trade union representatives demanded the following:

From their unions

- Not to forget that the history of the trade union movement is a history of unprotected workers, who brought themselves together in order to achieve their rights before employers and governments; to apply the core principle of solidarity, to accept that by protecting and legalizing the rights of the informal economy workers, they are also protecting the rights of their formally employed members; to realize that, when it comes to such workers, a proper work contract and regular payment of union dues cannot be the only criteria for union membership.
- To make the necessary changes to their regulations, internal structures and organization forms, in order to organize workers in atypical workplaces and in the informal economy..
- To adopt the policy of organizing the least protected workers, especially women, and to create strategic and action plans for their organizing and representation.
- To introduce awareness programs on the nature of informal and unprotected labour for their members and the public. To launch information and educational campaigns for unregistered worker.
- To introduce special services, helplines, legal advice and other protective programs for such workers (self-employment programs, job seeking centres, founding cooperatives, getting loans, organizing retraining and educational programs, mediation with local governments and administration, and so on.).
- To introduce atypical forms of labour and informal economy work into collective agreements, and to extend their collective agreements to such workers as well.

- To introduce innovative ways of educating and mobilizing workers in all labour and workplace forms.

- To build coalitions with different NGOs, which bring together workers in the informal economy.

- To perform research and collect data and information on the informal economy, and to publish it and organize public debates, in order to alert the public to the issue.

- To organize, if it is necessary, protest- and other public actions to protect workers in the informal economy.

From the employers and their associations:

- To stimulate employers to act legally by registering employed workers with full salaries, and to stimulate such employers condemn all, companies which avoid the paying employees' taxes and benefits.

- To support legal behaviour, collective bargaining, respect for legal and agreed obligations to workers; to respect, in full, core international standards and ILO Conventions, and to promote the values of dignified work.

- Employers' associations, should develop their own "blacklist" of employers illegally employing workers, and other employers active in the informal economy, as they are damaging the reputation of socially responsible employers.

- Employers' associations should try to obtain, in legitimate ways and in partnership with unions, necessary measures for legalizing informal economy workers in a socially responsible way, including re-evaluating of tax regulations and boosting measures and subsidies.

- To start the campaign among their members to primarily employ workers through permanent work contracts, instead of the fixed-term work contracts which currently dominate, in order to achieve better loyalty amongst workers, higher productivity and profit.

From their governments

- To urgently form, special national multidisciplinary teams, unions, which involving trade will participate in the creation of national programs and strategies for the fight for dignity of work and workers in the formal and informal economies.

- To start public campaigns against abusing labor in both formal and informal economies, as well as to raise public awareness and legal knowledge of the rights of such workers.

- To perform research and introduce new forms of measuring work in the informal economy.

- To introduce necessary legal changes in order to legalize every form of labour in terms of approaching core social rights (health and pension insurance, protection from unemployment, and so on.).

- To reform labour legislation in a way to expand the coverage of the legal protection to those working outside of the formal economy, and to introduce new forms of labour relations and atypical labour forms.

- To insure for all workers, regardless of whether their work is documented or not, core rights from the international ILO conventions, primarily the right for trade union organizing and collective bargaining.

- To introduce favourable tax conditions for legalizing informal economy work.

- To introduce strong legal measures and financial penalties for employers persisting in employing workers in illegal terms.

- Not to punish workers in the informal economy, who work in such conditions due to social necessity and misery.

- To ease and speed up administrative procedures for registering business initiatives and companies.

- To open special offices to assist the self-employed, and to facilitate and service this process throughout, including obtaining business and other loans, achieving the right for tax deductions, assistance in terms of market availability, and similar measures.

- To introduce labour courts adapted to changed forms of formal and informal labour.

- To support tripartite social dialogue with the aim of achieving equality.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

on 4 October 2003 (see box) in which they made a variety of proposals aimed at employers, governments and trade unions.

Following the conference, women from trade union confederations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the Brčko district held a joint conference during which they stated that 42% of all workers were in the informal economy and 54% of those were women.

In Bulgaria, the Women's Parliament - 21st Century- a group of 40 women's organisations including the main trade unions, adopted the Rovinj Declaration on 3 November 2003 in addition to their own declaration. It states that, on average, women in Bulgaria earn 18.4% less per month than men, most workers

in the informal economy are women, and it is they who are underpaid, harassed and simply worse off.

"We're still in the beginning stages of trade union activities in the informal economy. Women are starting these activities in cooperation with their male colleagues, NGOs and so on", specifies Ms Petrovic.

Regional trade union confederations (CEETUC) met on 30-31 October 2003 in Gdańsk, Poland, to assess the situation of workers in the informal economy and migrant workers in these countries. "This has also given new momentum to the region's trade unions. They'll be able to put this item on the agenda if they haven't done so already", emphasises Ms Petrovic.

Jasna Petrovic also suggests that the trade unions speak "on behalf of the en-

tire working population, including workers in the public sector, private companies and the informal economy" and "adapt their structures" accordingly so they can "become more representative and enlist" new members.

Organising workers in the informal economy means "encouraging people, and especially women, to place their trust in the trade unions as well as making people aware of their rights and the importance of collective action in promoting these rights.

"Trade unions need to understand that they can only protect the lifestyle and rights of workers in the structured economy by fighting for the rights of workers in the informal economy. If they don't, the current informalisation of work will continue", she concludes. ●

ANNE RENAUT

Moldavia: campaign to recruit in the informal economy

Moldavia, one of the poorest countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States, has seen a third of its population, including many skilled workers, leave to find work elsewhere over the last ten years. Women and young people, who are over-represented among such migrants, also form the bulk of workers in the informal economy. With the support of the ICFTU, Moldavian trade union confederation, the CSRM, has launched a programme specifically targeting informal workers.

Moldavia is a largely rural country. Almost 40% of the members of the Moldavian trade union confederation affiliated to the ICFTU, the CSRM, are affiliated to the federation of agricultural workers. The informal economy accounts for 50% to 60% of GDP, and emigration is very high. Around a million Moldavians, out of a population of around 3,600,000, work abroad.

Over recent years, the CSRM has experienced a drastic fall in its membership. In 1992, it had 2 million members, compared with 480,000 today. Many members left following the break away of Transnistria (Pridnestrovje) in 1990, where 300,000 members were based (150,000 are now affiliated to the "Solidarity" confederation).

The situation in Moldavia is above all driven by the immense poverty in the country. Around 60% of Moldavians

live below the poverty line. Whilst the minimum cost of living in Moldavia is estimated at 100 US\$, the average salary is only 45 US\$ and the minimum wage 10 US\$.

"Many agricultural and industrial sectors have been privatised. Some 100,000 workers have been dismissed without compensation. The unions reacted poorly, as they were not aware of the country's economic situation. Companies that used to employ 5000 to 6000 people now only employ 200 to 300. People are looking for ways to earn money, particularly in rural areas. The official unemployment rate is 12%, but in reality at least 20% of the population is jobless. There are around 200,000 people who are not even registered with the employment agencies," explains CSRM President Piotru Shiryak.

In 2001 and 2002, the CSRM organised numerous initiatives on the informal economy, with the active involvement of the confederation's women's section. The vast majority of workers in the informal economy are women and young people.

In December 2002, the CSRM adopted a programme on organising and recruiting members working in the informal economy, and published a manual to help fulfil its objectives. In March 2003, it organised a workshop, backed by the ILO, on "Trade Unions and the Informal Economy", which was also at-

tended by representatives of the government, employers and NGOs.

The Director of the CSRM's Labour Institute, Valentina Teosa, presented workshop participants with the results of a survey of 1500 workers carried out in the regions of Chisnau and Belcu. Of all those surveyed, 18% said that their salary was paid "cash-in-hand", 9% said that part of their salary was paid in this way, and 8.8% said they suspected that their company was not declared. 11% did not have employment contracts, and 18% did not have conventional employment contracts.

According to Mr Shiryak, "A first step forward has been taken with the passing of the Employment Act on 1 October 2003 which stipulates that an employment contract must be drawn up for each worker hired, and that employers failing to do so risk prosecution. Furthermore, since our country became independent in 1991, intersectoral committees have been set up in each region to negotiate collective agreements and unionise workers."

In addition to these regional committees, the CSRM has also created new structures devoted to recruiting self-employed workers, street vendors, taxi drivers, micro-entrepreneurs, and so on, or in short, all areas in which informal work predominates. ●

ANNE RENAUT

SEWA: helping women in the informal economy to become self-sufficient

Labour, cooperative and the women's movement, the Self Employed Women's Association, SEWA, pioneered the organisation of women in the informal economy in the early Seventies. It provides women with practical help such as access to micro-credit, education, and social protection.

Founded in 1972 in Ahmedabad, the principal city of the state of Gujarat in India, by Ela Bhatt, SEWA now has some 700,000 members across the country (see contact details on page 16). SEWA is affiliated to international trade union federations in three sectors: agriculture (IUF), chemicals, (ICEM) and textiles (ITGLWF).

The inspiration for SEWA came from Mahatma Gandhi, who also championed the cause of the textile workers in this region, based on the values of independence, solidarity and non-violence.

Today, 93% of India's labour force works in the informal economy, compared to 82% in 1981. According to SEWA, the informal economy accounts for 66% of GDP, 50% of national savings and 39% of exports.

SEWA was "born with the idea that female occasional workers, street vendors, home workers... also have a right to fair and decent wages and working conditions, as well as social protection, in short, the right to greater visibility and dignity. That's why SEWA encourages

self-employed women to form cooperatives, to develop an alternative economic system. We now have 102 cooperatives, some agricultural, others in services, manufacturing, sales..." explains Manali Shah, Assistant General Secretary of the movement (1).

SEWA has also set up support services for its members, including a credit and savings bank, insurance and social security schemes. Having first acted as an intermediary between its members and the national banks, the SEWA bank went on to provide loans directly to its members, giving them easier access to credit, to finance the purchase of seeds or fertilisers, for example. The bank also runs an Integrated Insurance Scheme, which helps women to cover their needs in terms of health care, childcare and housing.

HOLISTIC APPROACH

"We have a holistic and integrated approach, as we believe that, in the case of women workers, the whole family is implicated. We therefore encourage our members to look at eleven points: employment, revenue, food, child protection, health, housing, property, trade union strength, decision-making power, autonomy and education," says Manali Shah.

Among SEWA's first members were the bidi (cigarette) workers. None of these female home workers were aware of their rights. SEWA managed to affiliate them by acquiring identity cards for them. It negotiated with their employers and intermediaries to put an end to their exploitation, and it also took Gujarat's largest bidi employer to court to defend

the workers' right to be covered by the Provident Fund.

"This battle went on for 17 years. The employers first of all claimed that these women did not work for them, but we managed to prove otherwise, by tracing the whole production chain back to them, thanks to the brand of the bidis. The employers and subcontractors, enraged, pulled out of Ahmedabad. That led to a month-long strike. Following discussions with the Labour Minister, we are now trying to set up a tripartite Provident Fund," continues Shah.

SEWA also organised street vendors, and now represents 40,000 workers. It began in 1974 when SEWA lodged a complaint on behalf of 525 street vendors. "We stated that, according to the Indian Constitution, everyone has the right to a vending space. After a long fight, we won. Street vendors can now work without being harassed by the police or the municipal authorities. They no longer have to pay bribe money. These street vendors are now organising their own campaigns to obtain vending spaces, licences, identity cards, and representation on urban policy-making bodies," she explains.

THE MARKET DOES NOT RESOLVE EVERYTHING

This is how SEWA helps the women to find an outlet for their products, but the association insists that the market must be regulated. "The market is simply a trading place which we have to use to sell our products and earn money. But the market does not resolve everything. It doesn't provide the women with training, for example, nor does it provide equal opportunities, despite the need being there. So it should be regulated, not with a view to ensuring maximum profit but greater cooperation, and many institutions are needed to achieve this," explained Renana Jhabwala, SEWA's national coordinator, who participated in the World Social Forum in Mumbai in January 2004.

"The winners of globalisation must not forget its victims. And development cannot rest solely on a small section of the population," she concluded. ●

A.R. (AND DIDIER BLAIN)

The HMS has 1.2 million members in India's informal economy

The Indian trade union confederation Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) has 1.2 million members in the informal economy. Many of them are women, which is why the union has made them one of its top priorities.

"The HMS places great importance on organising women. The proportion of women working in the informal economy is, in fact, very high. The HMS is one of the few organisation to have a national women's committee that forms an integral

part of the national executive committee," points out Umraolmal Purohit, General Secretary of the HMS, which has a total of 4 million members. The HMS is strongly committed to organising workers which work in the informal economy. "We are hard at work in the agriculture, forestry and construction industries, as well as with street vendors, home-based workers and rickshaw drivers. We achieved great success with our recent campaign in the informal economy. We recruited 512,000 new members," explains Mr Purohit.

ANNE RENAUT AND DIDIER BLAIN

(1) Words pronounced at a workshop organised in January 2003 by Dutch trade union confederation FNV and the WIEGO network (Women in Informal Employment, Globalising and Organizing) entitled "From marginal work to core business: European trade unions organising in the informal economy".

Latin America: multiple initiatives...

In August 2003, the ICFTU regional organisation in Latin America (ICFTU-ORIT), the IFWEA (International Federation of Workers Education Associations) and the WIEGO network (NGOs and unions in the informal economy) concluded a cooperation agreement known as the Lima Accord which aims to ensure that workers in the informal economy are fully able to exercise their fundamental rights. ICFTU-ORIT, which is very active in educating its members who work in the informal economy, recently published a guide to the informal economy for use by trade union trainers (1).

Latin America is home to several trade union initiatives in this field, many of which focus on women. We review them below.

Peru: the Association of Rural Women of Huancabamba (*Asociación de Mujeres Campesinas de Huancabamba*) has been a member of Peru's National Trade Union Federation (CUT) since 1995. Founded 15 years ago, the association represents some 4,000 women from provinces in the Piura region. These women do not own the land they work, although in some cases they rent it. They are self-employed and their businesses consist mainly of selling produce in towns or manufacturing utilitarian and decorative crafts. In addition, these women enjoy the support of an NGO called IAMMAC (Institute for Support of Rural Women).

Thanks to support from trade unions, the association now has an agricultural production centre and self-managed breeding facilities as well as several small businesses providing services, and technical and vocational training. The association is also part of the National Network of Rural Women (*Red Nacional de la Mujer Campesina*). Within the Executive Committee of CUT, the association is responsible for the Women's Secretariat and the Fiscal Secretariat.

The Federation of Women Domestic Workers of Peru (*Federación Nacional de Trabajadoras del Hogar*) has, after many long years of struggle, managed to get a law passed and circulated on working conditions for domestic workers. The organisation, which has some 10,000 members, maintains links and coordinates its activities with CUT and CGTP. The above-mentioned law covers a number of areas, including social security, breaks for breastfeeding, compensation and limits the working day to eight hours. For the time being, the organisation aims to ensure compliance with



Photo: ILO

these rights, even though the notion of 'servitude' is still alive in much of Peruvian society. This federation is affiliated with the Latin American Federation of Women Domestic Workers (*Federación Latinoamericana de Trabajadoras del hogar*).

Panama: the Union of Women Workers of the Cloque province (*Sindicato de Trabajadoras de la Provincia de Cloque*) represents women workers in rural environments who nevertheless maintain contact with city life. The organisation is a member of Convergencia Sindical and was a founder of the Federation of Workers in the Informal Sector (FETRUC). The organisation provides services to promote crafts and trade union training, as well as medical support services. It is currently involved in developing a programme of micro-loans.

Brazil: the National Garment Workers Union (*Sindicato Nacional de Costureiras*), a member of the Fuerza Sindical federation, represents garment workers, including women who work at home and the self-employed women. This union has several branch offices in São Paulo, Osasco and Rio de Janeiro, and has its own website. The services it offers its members include occupational health, support in negotiating with municipal authorities, financial, legal and trade union consultancy, access to micro-loans, and involvement in travelling fairs. A significant proportion of its

members enjoy social security cover.

The Movement of Cocobabacu Cultivators (*Movimiento Interestadual de Quebradeiras de Cocobabacu*) was founded in 1989 to protect a natural resource unique to the Amazon known as cocobabacu (nuts) and is based in the state of Maranhao (which covers an area of 10.3 million hectares). Rampant exploitation by both public and private companies has led to a serious deterioration of the crop. The movement has forged major alliances with environmental protection groups. Women generally work with their children and are organised within both MIQCB and cooperatives with links to trade union federations. The movement has organised several interstate events since 1991.

Colombia: the National Union of Women Workers in Children's Homes (*SINTRACIHOBI, Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadoras al Cuidado de la Infancia en Hogares de Bienestar*) was founded in 1989. It currently acts on behalf of 56 organisations across the country and is represented in 18 regions. Over 15,000 women are members of the trade union. SINTRACIHOBI works to protect the rights of children and women workers in this sector who are affiliated with CUT and CTC in Colombia. The organisation has achieved success concerning social security, skills development and specialist training. It is also involved in the Movement of Women for Peace (*Movimiento de Mujeres por la Paz*).

Honduras: the Union of Florists (*Sindicato de Mujeres Floristas de los Mercados de Honduras*) is associated with the *Sindicato Unido de Locatarios de los Mercados de Honduras* (SULMERH), which in turn is a member of CTH. The organisation is involved in certain aspects of negotiations with the municipalities of San Pedro de Sula and Tegucigalpa. Social welfare initiatives, loan schemes and mutual support programmes have been developed. The union contributes to the social security system and to skills development programmes aiming to improve its own ability to bring products and services to the market. Some of these female workers have returned to the crafts sector, such as the Mercado Modelo Artesanas in San Pedro de Sula. ●

A.R.

(1) *Guía de Formadores para el Sector Informal*. The guide is available in Spanish and can be downloaded (in four parts) from: http://www.cioslorit.org/galeria/part_1.pdf http://www.cioslorit.org/galeria/part_2.pdf, http://www.cioslorit.org/galeria/part_3.pdf, http://www.cioslorit.org/galeria/part_4.pdf.

Trade union and NGO networks involved in organising women informal workers.

Here are the main networks of trade unions and NGOs working towards organising women who work in the informal economy, an initiative pioneered by the Self Employed Workers Association (SEWA) in India. WIEGO, SEWA, Homenet and the ICFTU worked together to secure the adoption of ILO Convention 177 on Home Work (1996).

● **WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment, Globalizing and Organizing)** www.wiego.org

WIEGO is the umbrella organisation for all those involved in organising women in the informal economy. It presents itself as a research and analysis network, founded in 1997, which brings together trade unions, NGOs, education and international development organisations. The founding members of WIEGO are SEWA, SEWU, Homenet and Streetnet.

Mailing address: Carr Center for Human Rights/Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University 79 John F. Kennedy Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA
Phone: 1-617-495-7639
Fax: 1-617-496-2828
E-Mail: wiego@ksg.harvard.edu

● **SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association)** www.sewa.org

SEWA was founded in India in 1972 by Ela Bhatt, who is also the president of WIEGO. It is a trade union (affiliated to three international trade union federations), a women's movement and a cooperative movement with 700,000 members. SEWA organises home-based workers, street vendors, self-employed workers (paper pickers, forest workers, salt workers...), and relies particularly on the formation of cooperatives to increase their market access. SEWA has also set up supportive services such as a credit and savings bank, and insurance and social security schemes.

Mailing address: SEWA Reception Centre
Opp. Victoria Garden, Bhadra, Ahmedabad - 380 001, India.
Phone: 91-79-5506444, 5506477
Fax: 91-79-5506446
Email: mail@sewa.org

● **SEWU (Self Employed Women's Union)**

SEWU does not have its own site, but a presentation of the organisation can be found at: <http://www.voices.org.za/sewu.html>
Founded in South Africa in 1993, based on the SEWA model, SEWU mainly organises street vendors. SEWU is at the head of Streetnet International and is affiliated to Union Network International, UNI. Mailing address: P.O.Box 62745 Bishopsgate, Durban 4008
Phone (031) 304 6504
Fax (031) 304 6503
Email: sewu@sn.apc.org

● **Streetnet International**

<http://www.streetnet.org.za/>
International organisation of street vendors, researchers and groups active in this area in eleven countries. It is based in Durban (South Africa). Set up in 1995, its action is based on the Bellagio International Declaration of Street Vendors, and targets street vendors, street vendors' associations, municipal authorities and international organisations. Pat Horn, International Coordinator
Phone 031 307 4038 (work) or 031 201 3528 (home)
Fax 031 306 749
Email: stnet@iafrica.com (w) or phaps@netactive.co.za (h)

● **Homenet International**

<http://www.homenetww.org.uk/>
Network of trade unions and NGOs working with home workers based in Leeds (United Kingdom) and founded in 1994.
Mailing address: HomeNet, 24 Harlech Terrace, Leeds LS11 7DX, UK
Phone +44 113 270 1119
Fax +44 113 277 3269
Email: homenet@gn.apc.org

● **RESPECT (Rights, Equality, Solidarity, Power, in Europe & Co-operation Today)**

European network of migrant domestic workers, set up in 1998, and supported by Solidar, an alliance of NGOs linked to the labour and trade union movement. Its foundation stemmed largely from the action of British association Kalayaan (<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/kalayaan/>). See Solidar Web site: <http://www.solidar.org/doclist.asp?SectionID=9>

Philippines: women's association empowers informal workers

Makalaya (Women Workers Aiming for Freedom) is an association founded in 1998 in the Philippines by women trade unionists and informal workers. It now has 3000 members and is working towards making women aware of their rights.

Its objective is to develop women's management and leadership skills, to strengthen the role of women within mixed organisations, and to organise women who work in the informal economy. Makalaya seeks to combine the roles of trade union and association. "We are working as a pressure group both inside and outside the trade union movement," explains Teresita Borgonos of Makalaya.

"There are many public organisations with which informal workers can enrol. In 1995, the social security system was opened up to self-employed workers, based on the principle of voluntary contributions. A health insurance scheme was also set up for informal self-employed workers as part of the Philhealth medical aid programme, but the rules have become very numerous and complicated. This is why we are trying to act as a link between informal workers and these official organisations," she points out.

Makalaya acts as a pressure group and a negotiator. In rural areas, for example, the association takes care of collecting the social security contributions of its members and paying them to the local government. It is also working in partnership with local governments to develop micro-credit schemes, provide non-financial inputs and encourage the formation of cooperatives.

"We educate women and help them to understand these issues so that they can defend themselves and negotiate on their own behalf," adds Ms Borgonos. ●

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