

# Mauritania: organising women in the informal economy to fight against poverty

The economic crisis and changes in social structures are pushing increasing numbers of women into the informal economy. Thanks to a campaign to organise women being undertaken by the Mauritanian union confederation CGTM, with the support of the ICFTU, female union membership has more than doubled. The time has now come to consolidate this achievement with concrete projects, and the CGTM is appealing for international trade union solidarity.



These young women are informal agricultural workers from the Rkiz region, a hundred kilometres east of Rosso, on the border with Senegal. Upon recognising the CGTM team from Rosso driving alongside their field, they run to the edge of the road proudly waving the brand new membership cards obtained due to the campaign led by the CGTM to organise women working in the informal economy.

# The number of women working continues to rise ... but segregation persists

**Mauritanian women are entering the labour market in increasing numbers, dispelling the long-held belief that a woman's place is in the home. Values are changing and schooling rates amongst girls are rising, but occupational segregation remains strong.**

**C**overed from head to toe by light, colourful melhafas, what place do Mauritanian women have on the labour market? "In our mother's generation, many women wore the hijab. Nowadays we all cover our heads, but rarely cover our faces. Islam is part of the everyday lives of men and women here, but it does not hold any retrograde connotations. We wear the scarf because that's our religion, but that doesn't stop us from working and being involved in the public arena," explains Mahjouba Mint Salek.

The literacy rate rose from 30% in 1998 to 45% in 2000 but the gap between men and women remains. An encouraging sign, however, is the increasing number of girls going on to secondary education and university. Yet, although the number of girls going to university is higher than boys, they have more difficulty finding work when they leave, with only 27.7% entering the labour market as opposed to 63% of men.

## PIONEERS

Biha El Azza Heidoud, a nurse specialised in paediatric intensive care, is also Mauritania's first camerawoman. "I have been working as a paediatric nurse for eight years, but after work, I film videos of marriages and other events. Filming is my passion. Whatever time of the day or night, I'm always ready to go! In the beginning, some members of my family would say to me that it was a job for men not for women. Now I'm known in all the papers as the first Mauritanian camerawoman and they are very proud to say that they're my family. The mentality is changing; the president himself has spoken of women's liberty, their emancipation. It is a very different line to that taken by his predecessor, who wanted women to stay at home. Even though they wear a veil, Mauritanian women can now do any kind of job, the

progress on the work front is really very strong. But a major problem remains: divorce. A man can leave just like that with another woman, completely abandoning his first wife and leaving her alone with their children. That's the main difficult-

ly," insists Biha, who herself divorced on her own initiative, and has a 12-year-old child and a young relative to support.

Despite the increasingly common good examples of such "pioneers", the immense majority of Mauritanian women still have very limited access to employment, like the young women we met in Akjoujt, the desert region northwest of Nouakchott, where "owing to societal pressures, girls here cannot move to go and find work in the city. Yet 40% of the women here are divorced or single".

"Tradition is still a major obstacle for women trying to enter the labour market. Women started to work in the late seventies, early eighties, but are generally confined to the administrative and health sectors. Today, it's true that they are starting to take on increasingly diverse jobs and aspire to equalising the men in their field of work. But we still have a long way to go, particularly in the rural areas..." regrets Mahjouba.

## STRONG GROWTH IN RURAL EMPLOYMENT FOR WOMEN

Mauritanian women occupy few positions of responsibility and have little access to ongoing training. For work of equal value, women receive under 60% of the pay received by men. They mainly work in the public and semi-public sectors (health, education, post and telecommunications, banking, etc.) industrial fishing (onshore industries), and petty commerce. With a fertility rate of 5.4 children per woman, the difficulty in combining work and family responsibilities remains a major obstacle given the absence of childcare facilities.

"The place traditionally reserved for men and women is evolving," explains Oumoukelzoume Mint Med, a birthing assistant and a CGTM women's regional coordinator in Nouakchott, "More and more women are doing little jobs to feed their children, which is changing the perception of their role." Mauritania is witnessing particularly strong growth in female employment in the rural sector, which has doubled over the last decade. Today, nearly half of all women workers in Mauritania are employed in agriculture, as women take over the places left vacant by the men emigrating to urban areas in search of better-paid employment. The work being taken over is particularly low-paid hard labour. ●

### ● Single parent families

28% of all households are single parent families headed by a woman, more than half of whom live in rural areas. This situation is explained by the high rates of divorce and widowhood (4%), owing to the large age difference between husbands and wives.

### ● Maternal mortality

The fertility rate is 5.4 births per woman. Maternal mortality (before or after birth) is 747 per 100,000, as compared with the average of 480 for Africa as a whole, in other words, almost double the average rate in Africa.

### ● Genital mutilation

Over 70% of women (95% of women from the Halpulaar ethnic group and 92% of Soninke women) are genetically mutilated. Prohibited in medical establishments, female circumcision is still practised clandestinely and can be fatal if there are complications.

### ● Infant mortality

Infant mortality (under 5 years) is 7.4%. More than a third of all children suffer from chronic malnutrition, and one out of ten from acute malnutrition.

### ● Illiteracy

Almost 60% of the population aged over 15 is illiterate. The literacy rate rose from 30% in 1998 to 45% in 2000 but the gap between men and women remains.

### ● Employment and pay inequalities

27.7% of women are in paid employment as compared to 63% of men. For work of equal value, women receive less than 60% of the pay received by men.

# How to meet the expectations of women informal workers flocking to the union

**Thanks to the ICFTU-backed campaign to organise women, the CGTM has recruited more than 5,000 new women members, most of whom work in the informal economy. What now remains to be done is to consolidate this achievement with projects capable of improving the day-to-day lives of these women who are among Mauritania's poorest workers.**

**B**ooks filled with the names of newly recruited women from all regions of the country are piled up at CGTM's headquarters in Nouakchott, having been proudly delivered by the regional coordinators of the recruitment campaign. The number of women members in the CGTM rose from 3,750 (15% of total membership) in June 2003 to 9,425 in May 2005 (over 30%), that is, 5,675 new women recruits, mainly from the informal economy, which represents a 151% increase in female membership.

“Some of the coordinators will have to travel for two days by taxi-brousse to get back to their regions, but after this seminar to evaluate the recruitment campaign they are all going away with a great deal of motivation. What's more, they have all insisted on taking new stocks of membership cards, to meet the strong demand expected on their return,” rejoices Mahjouba Mint Salek, executive secretary in charge of youth and women's affairs at the CGTM.

She has, indeed, every reason to rejoice, given that in Mauritania “society is very conservative and all forms of struggle have traditionally been the exclusive realm of men,” according to Mahjouba, who became the first female member of the CGTM's executive committee in 1999. “Women only started to show an interest in unions in the 1980s. Their interest became more marked in the 1990s. However, since the advent of trade unionism in our country, owing to their role in society and in the production of goods and services, women have always been on the margins of socio-professional organisations. As a result, they did not play a role in their decision making bodies,” she adds.

Conscious that this state of affairs



*“This campaign has brought new blood into the union,” rejoices Mahjouba Mint Salek, executive secretary in charge of women and youth affairs at the CGTM.*

had become outdated with the widespread schooling of girls and the massive influx of women into the labour market, the CGTM decided during its 2nd Ordinary Congress in 2001 to place a national secretary in charge of women and youth affairs on its executive committee and set itself the overall goal of organising women workers both in the formal and informal economies. With an economic crisis and the dismantling of former social structures underway, women are, in fact, taking up informal work on a massive scale, entering the labour market to make up for the dwindling household revenues following on from the wave of dismissals linked to the process of structural adjustment.

The CGTM now has two women on its executive committee, out of a total of nine members, and a women's officer is always on duty at the union headquarters to attend to the many women who come along with queries of all kinds. Within just a few years, the atmosphere in the corridors of the union office has become very feminine.

In the past, the union only recruited women in a limited number of sectors,

such as general administration, rural development, public health, post and telecommunications and certain industrial units in the major cities. “We now contact the women working in companies. We approach those we know, we meet up with them, then ask for a meeting to be held within the company. Some employers accept, but others refuse because they consider unionised workers to be problematic,” explains Mahjouba Mint Salek, conceding that organising the public sector is more difficult, “because as soon as you defend someone working in the public sector you are labelled as an opponent of the government, with all the problems that can entail. So some people are afraid, which sometimes makes the task of recruiting very difficult.”

The informal economy is in the full throes of expansion. “The sector employs at least a third of the active population in Mauritania and the share of women working in this sector – selling vegetables, couscous, handicrafts, dyeing cloth, etc. – is constantly rising. Many of them are the family's main

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breadwinner. They often belong to traditional or customary groupings, agricultural or market garden pre-cooperatives, associations and friendly societies," continues Mahjouba. "They are generally unaware of their basic rights, have no social protection, and often fear trade unions, which they associate with the State."

The sheer scale of the country and the fact that several regions are located in isolated enclaves was the first major obstacle confronted during the launch of the awareness raising and organising campaign. "We started by targeting the capital region of Nouakchott, the mining regions, and Trarza. We then moved on to the three regions on the banks of the Senegal River, followed by the more remote regions near Mali, and finally reached all the far-flung regions of the country.

"In the beginning, when we went into the most isolated confines of the regions, the women didn't always understand what we wanted of them. Now that they have a better understanding of what the trade union movement is and have learnt that many other women like themselves have joined the movement in all the regions of the country, in addition to having seen for themselves that the ICFTU has travelled there to meet them, and that even na-



*The seminar held on 10 May 2005 in Nouakchott to evaluate the project to build the organising capacities of women and to strengthen their presence and role in the structures of the CGTM (in collaboration with the ICFTU) provided an opportunity to assess the activities to recruit and organise women, their impact and shortfalls, as well as the measures to be taken to improve future prospects.*

## Divorce, a major poverty factor

**Over 30% of Mauritanian women are divorced. With the passing of the new Family Code, their rights and those of their children are now better protected, yet divorce is still all too often synonymous with the marginalisation and impoverishment of women.**

**40** % of Mauritanian women marry more than once, usually to men from the same ethnic group and caste. In Mauritania, unlike other Muslim countries, there is no stigma to divorce. "According to Mauritanian tradition, the more husbands you have the more respected you are. It's not at all like in Morocco, where being divorced is seen as a social flaw, or in Mali, where divorced women have difficulty finding work," explains Mahjouba Mint Salek, executive secretary in charge of women's and youth affairs at the CGTM. "I have been married

three times. I would have preferred to stay with my first husband, but his family was a problem. I have good relations with all my ex-husbands' new wives and they are all very kind to my children. It's like a big clan, and everyone respects one other. A young wife of one of my ex-husbands has named her daughter after me. Things have evolved on this level. In the past, jealousy was a terrible problem, it was only natural, as the home and family was women's only source of self esteem. Now they are starting to have other forms of personal development," continues Mahjouba.

"Where I'm from, in my ethnic group in the Brakna region (on the border with Senegal), the thinking is different. It is believed that a woman should be submissive, that only death should separate her from her husband, and that she has to accept polygamy," explains Niang Mamadou, the CGTM executive committee member in charge of international affairs.

Although the abandoning of children is not common within the black communities, polygamy is the cause of a lot of human tragedy for women and

children. In the Arab communities, however, polygamy is covert, which creates major problems for the children born out of clandestine marriages. Likewise, divorce all too often leads to children being abandoned. Previously, when a woman divorced she would be taken in by their parents or their brothers. But now they find themselves on their own. 28.8% of all households are, in fact, headed by a single woman, more than half of whom live in rural areas. The reasons behind this are the high rates of divorce and widowhood (4%), due to the large age difference between husbands and wives. Given the lack of schooling and job opportunities, the families supported by single mothers are affected the worst by poverty.

### STREET CHILDREN

"According to a WHO survey of street children, more than 40% are from families headed by single mothers aged, on average, between 25 and 35, who have often received no schooling and are generally from rural areas," explains Oumoukelzoume Mint Med, a birthing assistant and CGTM regional women's

tional television spoke of it, they now feel that there is much more sense to their actions," says Mahjouba. She goes on to explain that the work done on the ground aims to be as practical as possible: "We are looking for ways of helping them find land, financing, premises, or to set up cooperatives. We also try to advise them and provide them with a means of getting by, particularly those who are divorced and have children to support. We are ready to go before the courts, or to reintegrate those who lose their jobs into other sectors where they can work and enjoy protection.

The women taking part in the seminar were able to identify factors specific to the different sectors of activity, particularly in the informal economy, where most of the new recruits work. The main employment sectors are agriculture, market gardening, commerce, handicrafts, dyeing, restoration, hairdressing and beauty services, traditional fish processing and tourism.

The seminar also allowed them to take stock of the main problems faced in the organising of women, such as the burden of family responsibilities and the day-to-day fight for survival, which leaves women with little time for anything else.

"Women informal workers are extremely poor and have to fight to survive, especially the large numbers of divorced women who have to bring up their children alone. It's very difficult to

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coordinator in Nouakchott. When the divorced mother is under 25, she often returns to her family and becomes a social burden, as the family, happy to have one less mouth to feed when the daughter leaves, then find themselves having to feed her and her child. "Many of these women are those who have children to soldiers. Men in the army are not allowed to marry until they have completed five years service, so the children born before then are clandestine children. There are also women who are still married but their husbands do nothing to support their children, and women are often pushed into prostitution as the only way out," continues Oumoukelzoume.

#### FAMILY CODE

"We have been fighting for a Family Code since the 1960s, but all initiatives were thwarted for many years by the military regime, which regarded women in a traditional Islamic way, considering them to have no role outside the home. Until quite recently, there were no laws to protect women from abuse, especially in the context of divorce. But, fortunately, we now have the Family Code;



*"The implementation of this project to develop women's organising capacities has benefited from the logistical and training support provided within the framework of the cooperation project between the Belgian confederation CGSLB-MSI and the CGTM, financed by the Belgian DG for development cooperation," explains Ouedrago Lalla Aicha, the CGTM women's committee member in charge of external relations. It is within the framework of this cooperation that the CGTM recently launched two microprojects – a grain mill in Rosso and a rice husker in Rkiz – benefiting hundreds of women informal workers.*

it's a huge step forward," insists Mahjouba. Previously, only the traditional principles of the Sharia were observed, giving the husband all the rights; but the new legislation provides a legal framework for marriage. The Code, which took effect in July 2001, gives women the right to take legal action to demand respect for their rights and those of their children; it establishes and guarantees the fundamental rights of children and discourages polygamy. The practice of polygamy has not been abolished, but the wife can demand that its prohibition be mentioned in the marriage contract. The wife can also obtain a commitment from her husband that he will not prevent her from working or studying. Furthermore, the minimum age for marriage is set at 18 years, based on the principle of mutual consent.

Nonetheless, the rights established by law are still years ahead of the generally held views influencing rights in practice. "In the eyes of society, it is unacceptable for a woman to take legal action against her husband, as it is seen as an admission that the family needs help to feed its children, bringing it into dis-

repute. Furthermore, many women are still unaware of their rights, particularly in the rural regions," explains Oumoukelzoume. Given that the majority of the female population is illiterate and that many of the country's judges have been trained at purist Sharia schools, the need for information is blatant. The government is waging campaigns to spread information about the new Code, and the Secretary of State for Women's Affairs, Zeinebou Mint Ould Nehah, has set up a family litigation service. In 2004, the service dealt with almost 500 cases, mainly divorces, but also cases of domestic violence and problems linked to polygamy. If the service is unsuccessful in its attempt to conciliate the dispute, the wife is informed that she can take legal action to demand the rights she has as a divorcee, such as maintenance payments and the right to remain in the marital home if she has children. "People are beginning to understand that separation is not so easy. The divorce rate, moreover, is falling," says Leibnek Mint Soulé, head of the family policy division within the Office of the Secretary of State. ●

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get them involved in the union, as they don't have a minute to spare," explains Tety Mint Salek, coordinator of the Hodh El Gharbi region on the border with Mali, where many of the newly recruited women are couscous vendors or agricultural workers.

"It's true that women casual workers are terribly poor. They have to work from morning till night to be able to feed their children; they don't have any free time to devote to the union. I work as a fishmonger in Nouakchott, and I can assure you that a lot of ground had to be covered before we could get people to accept the union and make them realise it was about defending their rights, not about playing politics, as claimed by some political party representatives and other unions who came to see the women in my sector to try to discourage them from joining the CGTM," explains Fatimetou Mint Saiga, chair of the women's committee for the traditional fishing industry. The confusion between trade unionism and politics is, in fact, a major obstacle, along with the mistrust of NGOs. "The first NGO to come along asked for 500 MRO (1), and then left. A second one followed and asked for 1000 MRO, and then left. The women then got hold of sticks to receive the next NGO. That's why I was nearly beaten with a stick at first, but I finally managed to make them understand that I am just like them, and that I'm not going run away with their money. The fact that the



*"Until recently, the CGTM was practically non-existent in the Inchiri region. But today, women from the informal economy, like the traditional craftswomen here in Akjoujt are now flocking to the union," explains Yahfadha Mint Mayouf, campaign coordinator for the Inchiri region.*

CGTM sent several women's delegations to talk to them in a language they could understand, and then entrusted them with the task of speaking with other workers from the region, helped to establish a relationship of trust," recounts

Tekber Mint Hamady, coordinator for the Adrar region. Confirming these remarks, Aissata Mamadou Ly, coordinator of the Nouadhibou region, expressed her anger at the "damage caused by the proliferation of often fic-

### **Overcoming the mistrust of women workers in the informal economy**



I'm originally from Gorgol, but at age 10 I was married and came to live in Rosso with my husband. I

had my first child at age 13, at the start of my secondary studies. Despite all the problems that posed, I struggled on against the odds," explains Rougui Ba, chair of the CGTM regional women's coordinating committee in Trarza. Now aged 40, with 8 children, Rougui is a nurse at the State hospital in Rosso and has been active in the union for 6 years. "I work 8 hours a day at the hospital, and from 6.30 pm to 9 or 10 pm I go to the union office. But my husband has always encouraged me in my studies as well as in my trade union activities." The health sector is plagued with numerous problems. "The salaries are not enough to cover our food bills and there is no social coverage in case of illness. If we need medication, we have to pay for it out of our own pockets. There are serious motiva-

tion problems, as healthcare workers have no occupational training opportunities." The unionised health workers in Rosso have started to develop a project, thanks to the affiliation fees collected, to set up a small mutual health fund and a health centre that will be managed by professionals from the sector. "The CGTM is going to try to help us find a bed for the centre. The profit generated by this project will be used to finance other projects for women in the informal sector, such as a cooperative for the sale of market garden produce. Initially, the women from the informal economy were all very distrustful. We really had to work hard to explain the difference between the union and politics and to make them aware of the rights and duties of women both in their families and at work."

titious NGOs that collect affiliation fees and then disappear".

At the end of the seminar, the participants recommended that the CGTM should increase the number of women in its leadership and decision making structures to 30%; continue with the awareness raising campaign, and accompany it with trade union and occupational training. Above all, they insisted on the vital need to consolidate the results of this campaign with action geared towards building on microprojects and micro-credits for activities that are sustainable and will generate income to fight against the poverty of these women and their families. "If we could secure funding for some small project or another, we could then use the profits made to self finance other projects, and thus create a snowball effect against poverty," insists Mahjouba.

#### APPEAL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION SOLIDARITY

"We will not be able to stabilise and consolidate these gains if the trade union doesn't offer these women a "plus", whether in the form of expertise, through training, or a better quality of life, for example by improving their production tools, their distribution networks, or the management of their cooperatives. In some regions, the response of the female population was so strong that we had to stall our recruitment drive to allow us time to come up with concrete projects. This is what we did in Rosso, a region in the south of the country, where we identified a rice husking project, which we have just inaugurated thanks to the support of the Belgian confederation CGSLB. The project responds to the high demand for rice husking in this area and is set to create jobs, because, at the moment, small producers often have to wait for weeks or even months before they can have their rice husked, and cannot always afford the price they have to pay," explains Nahah, General Secretary of the CGTM. "In other regions, we are trying to set up grain mill projects, to allow the women in the informal economy to develop an activity that will provide them with a stable income. In the traditional fishing sector, we would like to set up a cold storage project. And for women dyers, we are thinking about how to help them modernise their production tools, to cut their costs and increase their revenue. The aim is not only to ensure an improvement in the working conditions of these women but also in their living conditions, which will benefit their families too. We have received numerous requests concerning community store projects in several regions, mutual healthcare funds in Trarza, where malaria rates are high due to the proximity of the river, and hostels in the tourist region of Adrar, or



*"Thanks to the support of the ICFTU, we have benefited from a project to organise women, which has enabled us to recruit a substantial number of female members, mostly in the informal economy – an area we were not sure how to tackle before. Being able to recruit thousands of poor men and women in the informal economy is an important step forward for us; it gives us credibility as a major player in the fight against poverty." (2)*

even essential childcare facilities in the mining region of Tiris Zemmour. Informal workers are extremely poor people, and the reason the women are joining our union in droves is because they are carried by the hope of an improvement in their conditions, however small, which are extremely difficult at the moment." (2) ●

(1) 100 OM=0,41  
 (2) The complete version of the interview with the CGTM General Secretary is available at:  
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991222100>

#### ● Poverty

One out of two Mauritians (46% according to the World Bank as compared with 50% in 1996) live under the poverty line, that is, on less than 200 euros a year. Only 19% of homes have electricity and only 15% have running water. The human development index (HDI 2004) established by the UNDP is 0.465, which puts Mauritania in 152nd place out of the 177 countries listed.

#### “Unions for Women – Women for Unions”



On 8 March 2002, the ICFTU launched a campaign to significantly increase female membership rates, with the ultimate aim of doubling the number of women trade union members. The campaign is also aimed at removing the obstacles preventing women from becoming members, activists and leaders of trade union organisations. The target groups prioritised

by the campaign are women working in the informal economy, export processing zones, and women migrant workers. 60 unions in 49 countries have already been mobilised to reach the campaign's objective. Encouraging results have already been registered across the globe in a wide and diverse range of countries such as Bangladesh, Spain, Australia, Brazil and the Congo. Within the framework of this global campaign, the ICFTU launched a two-year organising campaign in January 2004 targeting women in the Maghreb region (Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania). An Arabic translation of the ICFTU's organising campaign kit has served as the basis for the activities organised. The CGTM in Mauritania has distinguished itself by achieving particularly strong results within the framework of this campaign.

# Women are also organising in the fields



Two hundred market gardeners have just joined the union in Rosso, on the bank of the River Senegal.

**Often very isolated, the rural areas of Mauritania are characterised by poverty, under-employment and seasonal labour. Faced with difficulties in gaining access to land, water, micro-credits and distribution networks, women agricultural workers, who make up half of Mauritania's female working population, are starting to organise.**

**R**ural production (agriculture and animal rearing) represents 20% of Mauritania's GDP and directly

employs 50% of the active population. But the locust invasion of 2004 and insufficient rainfall seriously affected agricultural production, which is estimated to have fallen by 43% last year, leading to an appeal for emergency food aid from the international community. Local production has also received a serious blow from the competition waged by Asian imports, which the inhabitants of Nouakchott find to be less expensive and better quality. Although there is huge potential for developing irrigated agriculture along the banks of the River Senegal, the lack of infrastructure, particularly roads and power supplies, remains a considerable obstacle. The limited but promising market garden sector, which employs large numbers of women, remains held back by the lack of distribution networks.

Rougui Ba, chair of the CGTM regional coordinating committee in Trarza, who has managed to recruit 200 women in Rosso's market garden sector, tells us that "there are still around 50 women who have not yet joined, mainly out of fear due to the pressure placed on them by local politicians". "Last year, the locusts ravaged everything; the only thing left was sand," recalls Rougui, whilst showing us the lettuces being watered by market gardeners. "They would like to expand this plot of land that they cultivate together as a collective. One of the women has a plot nearby, which she is willing to let them use out of solidarity, but they do not have the tools needed to clear the land before they can cultivate it. The atmosphere between the different communities in this region bordering Senegal has been very strained since the

'events'(\*), but thanks to the union, the women are united, working together without regard for race, and not allowing past problems to create divisions", says Rougui Ba. Following the example set by the women in the Inchiri region, the unionised workers in Rosso would like to jointly open a small shop which all the union members could buy from. They are also thinking, with the help of the CGTM, of ways to get their produce to Nouakchott.

#### ILLITERATE AND ISOLATED

104km east of Rosso, in the completely isolated region of Rkiz, when the sun finally starts to set, the women are still hard at work, bending their backs in fields, cultivating peppers, rice, sorrel or aubergines. Many of the men from the local villages leave for long periods to work in Senegal and the women are left to cope with the family responsibilities alone. "The distances they have to cover by foot between their villages and the fields are very long. There is no source of drinking water where they work and they have to go without it for many hours, working under the sun, as it would take up too much time to go to the nearest well. The food situation is no better. The women often go without eating all day, as it is too far to go back to their villages for lunch. There's not a single clinic in the area, and not more than one car a week passes along this sandy track. The number one problem is malaria, along with the general exhaust-



*Working under the scorching sun and going all day without food, these women from the isolated region of Rkiz are exhausted by the long journeys between their villages and the fields.*

tion caused by having to cover long distances to get to the fields before working long hours without food," explain Fatimata Saidou Mbodj and Derida Mint Samba, speaking for the two local groups of women agricultural

workers. All the large plots of land are held by the large landowners and the women pool together to rent small fragmented plots of land. They also have to rent motor pumps to water the crops, which is their main problem, as demonstrated by the parched aubergine field behind Famita and Derida, which the women were not able to water in time. "The earnings we make from selling our produce are very low and not enough to live on. The women sell to intermediaries, who then mainly sell the produce on the other bank of the River Senegal. They take advantage of the fact that the women are illiterate and completely isolated, that they have no other outlet for their produce. The land is not fenced off, so we constantly have to take turns during the night to stop the sheep from eating everything.

The rice husking machines are too far away, so we have to use the traditional pestle and mortar. We do not have enough outlets for our products, and since we don't have any means of making preserves, our farming activity does not contribute much in terms of self subsistence. Some of the women from the village also fish on the river, to supply the local community. And if we don't have enough money to buy fish, we have to settle for just rice and beans," explain Fatimata and Derida.



*The motor pump of Rosso's market gardeners has broken down, so traditional methods are used to bring irrigation water from the river.*

#### "WOMEN MORE UNITED AND CHILDREN AT SCHOOL"

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It was a person from the village who told them that in Rosso, the capital of the Trarza region, the CGTM was taking an interest in women like them who work in the fields. "So we sent a messenger to Dialo, the head of the CGTM in the Rosso region, and he immediately came to speak to the women and unionise them." Out of the 400 women working along this portion of the River Senegal, 98 joined the union within just a few weeks. "Now that we are unionised, we are much more united and closer to one another. We meet up to talk, to discuss our problems; everyone is talking about it around here, it's a real novelty. All the children go to school now, that's also new. Before, they used to work in the fields or with the herds," say Fatimata and Derida, who go on to express their hopes that the women will benefit from a micro-project that will allow them to buy two motor pumps.

**"SHARING PROBLEMS AND EXPERIENCES"**

In the desert regions in the north,



*In the desert region of Akjoujt, the market gardeners grow vegetables in the shade of the date palms.*



*The eldest of the unionised women workers from Rosso, Coumba Bocar, is 58. Widowed 27 years ago, she has had 10 children, two of whom have died. "I work in agriculture, but it is impossible to develop even the slightest vision for the future. In the morning, when you reach the market, you have to pay the taxes before you can even sell anything, otherwise you're taken to the police station. In the evening, you have nothing to feed your children. It's very difficult for the women here. As of a certain age, many find themselves alone with their children; the men go elsewhere to find work or go for younger women," explains Cuomba. "The CGTM came to talk to us and has given us an idea of how we can defend ourselves better, how we can organise ourselves," she adds.*

water is obviously the number one problem for agricultural workers. In Akjoujt, northeast of Nouakchott, a group of around fifty market gardeners cultivate their vegetables in the shade of the date palms. "This region is devastated by drought, there are no jobs, and the locusts have done enormous damage.

Our main problem is water. We rent a motor pump from the village hall for two hours every two days. But it's expensive, as well as being impossible to water all the crops in two hours. We could expand our plot, but there's no point if we don't have water," they say regretfully. Here, the women are also faced with a major land ownership problem, as they cannot inherit land. Zeinab has been working in market gardening since 1992. "I'm alone with a large family to feed and have no other way of earning money to feed my children. We joined the union to have a place where we can share our problems and experiences. It's the only place where we can talk openly about our problems and hope for a better future." ●

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 (\*) In 1989, the two local communities, the Arab-Berbers (Moors) and the black Africans entered into a violent conflict in the Senegal River region. Massacres and expulsions followed on both sides of the river, targeting Senegalese immigrants and black Mauritanians in Mauritania, and Moorish immigrants in Senegal.

# Helping young people to escape poverty and precarious employment

**65% of Mauritania's population is under 40. With the support of the ICFTU, the CGTM has launched a national campaign to organise young workers (1). Trade unionists are working close to the ground, going out to meet students, the young unemployed and young informal workers.**

**O**n the streets of Nouakchott, dozens of young people, mainly from rural areas, wait in the scanty shade of dusty trees in the hopes of picking up a day's work. "This is a poor country where structural adjustment policies have led to major job cuts and the closure of many companies. The vast majority of young people live in precarious conditions, left entirely to fend for themselves. They have great difficulty finding a job and planning their future. The idea is to go out and meet all these young people hit by social exclusion and insecurity," explains Amadou M'Bow, head of the Provisional National Youth Committee set up in 2003 in line with the youth policy established at the CGTM Congress in 2001 (1). "Young people are no longer joining the union, either because they don't know anything about it, or because they are not interested. By going out to meet them, we realised that many think that unions are only for salaried workers and have nothing to offer young people leaving school without work or those working in the informal economy," continues Amadou.

## CHILD LABOUR

"School dropout rates are very high, especially among girls, who generally leave school before secondary level, at age 13 or 14. There's a huge gap between the large urban centres, where schooling rates are high, and rural areas, where child labour is more widespread. There's a significant difference in mentality," says Amadou.

"We went to school until age 12, but after that we were not able to continue with our studies," confirm several 15 to 16 year old girls, recent union recruits, who work in the fields in the villages of Ksar Mabareck and Simah, 104 km east of Rosso. "It was our parents who were first stirred by the CGTM's awareness raising campaign for the recruitment of women. They realised that it could help

to unite us and improve living conditions for all of us. The whole family spoke to us about it, so we decided to join. What we need most of all, as youngsters, is a literacy and training centre, as well as help to increase our income from market gardening," say the young girls.

## CALL FOR MICRO-CREDITS

"Unfortunately, schools do not respond to the demands of a very narrow labour market. The public sector barely creates any employment, whilst the private sector mainly offers work in building and public works, a sector where subcontracting is widespread and young people are heavily exploited. The commercial and agricultural sectors generally offer the most job opportunities. In the Senegal River valley, for example, young people are very active in agriculture. They have good basic skills and many new ideas, but not the resources needed to put them into practice," remarks Amadou. "Our initial contacts with the student target group were quite difficult, but the young people from the informal sector were much more receptive, coming towards us in large numbers. They thought that we could finance projects that would give them work; we explained that this was not the case, that the idea is to reflect on how to improve their situation by organising. Now, even those who initially left have come back. We have gained their trust without making empty promises. We obviously hope to be supported by outside donors, but are placing greater emphasis on self-financing options. In the informal economy, we have young members in nearly every trade - mechanics, shoe shiners, fishmongers..."

If we could secure access to micro-credits it would be a great help for young people trying to start up their own small garages or their own small businesses. I'm convinced that there's the potential to mobilise over 100,000 young workers," continues Amadou. "Why shouldn't we also set up mutual funds for the informal sector, to help improve the living conditions of these young people?"

## YOUNG WOMEN ARE STARTING TO TAKE THEIR RIGHTFUL PLACE

One of the aims of the CGTM youth campaign is to fight against gender inequality. "Young women face very heavy social constraints in Mauritania. People still believe that a woman's place is in the home. Many girls are taken out of school at a very young age to get

married and quickly have their first child. For us young men, so long as we have a shirt on our backs we can get by outside. It's much more difficult for girls, their outings and movements are very limited. Some progress is being made, but it is still very meagre. Fortunately, however, increasing numbers of girls are being able to go to school, which makes a big difference in comparison with previous generations. They are able to acquire the basics to help them manage the takings of a small business for example. But schools are often not well adapted to girls; they don't feel at ease there. In the union, however, they are starting to take their rightful place. Of the 9 members on the CGTM youth committee, 4 are young women, including the vice president."

## SOLIDARITY HAS GROWN

The CGTM campaign targeting women, particularly those in the informal sector, has not only succeeded in boosting membership but has also rejuvenated it.

Twenty-three-year-old Aicha from Rosso is out of work. The union gave her an opportunity to study IT. "In 2002, a microcomputer arrived at the CGTM office in Rosso through a programme financed by the French union FO, which allowed me to do practically all my training at the union office and obtain a diploma in IT. But the most difficult thing for young people is finding work. With the privatisations linked to the World Bank and the IMF, there are no more jobs in the public sector. And when a vacancy occasionally arises, they want a person with experience, not a young person." Aicha, who is single and lives with her parents, learnt that the CGTM was striving to help women, to educate them, and in 2002, at the beginning of the campaign, she joined the union. "I really felt there was a keen interest in the women in the region and that the sense of solidarity between women has grown," she rejoices.

Further north, in Akjoujt, a group of young women trained in secretarial skills and IT have joined together to set up a small secretarial services bureau equipped with a second-hand photocopier, an old Pentium 1 computer with a printer and a small range of basic stationery. Most of them are single young women and their parents do not want them to leave for the city. They joined the union after being contacted by the region's coordinator Yahfada Mint Mayouf, who raised their awareness. "I have

◀ CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

## ☞ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

been working in the secretarial bureau for a year. What most convinced me to join the union was the fact that we would be better informed of our rights and would be able to organise ourselves," explains 28-year-old Mahjouba El Hacen. In Nouakchott, the testimonies of young new recruits from the informal economy also abound. "I was educated to baccalaureate level, but didn't manage to sit the final exams, so I entered the same line of work as my mother: dyeing. I'm not the only one to have received an education in the group

of dyers, but there are no other openings for us. Some of the other girls have also studied, but we don't have any influential contacts so we have no chances of getting another job. With the small profit I manage to make from dyeing, I follow evening classes in information technology," explains 25-year-old Aissa Ta M'Bodj, union secretary of the group of dyers in Nouakchott who recently joined the CGTM. . "I would like to place the knowledge I have gained at the service of the women dyers, to improve their working conditions, to give them a better life than what I have seen my mother have. I really think we can im-

prove our situation by being better organised," adds Aissata. ●

(1) See the complete version of the Spotlight interview with Amadou M'Bow: <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221700&Language=EN>

(2) The first phase of the recruitment drive was 100% backed by ICFTU funding, which also allowed us to set up regional and sectoral committees. The ICFTU is now going to support phase two of the project, focused on training the young people in charge of awareness raising and recruitment campaigns. After this, the youth committee hopes to be able to organise regional seminars, then a national seminar, a follow-up

## High expectations among Nouakchott's dyers

"I was talking to the other women at the market, the market gardeners who had just joined the CGTM due to the campaign. We were talking about our problems as dyers, like the fact that we are constantly being forced to move on by the local authorities because we don't have any fixed premises, and they advised me to contact the CGTM. The police had forced us out of the place where we used to gather. Thanks to the CGTM's help, we have been able to find a stable workplace," recounts the chair of the Nouakchott dyers committee, Bneine, who is aged 36 and has 6 children. "We all used to work on our own, but it was impossible to cover our expenses (the water barrel, the coal, the premises, etc.). It's not quite as hard to cope with the costs when we pool together; we have formed a group of 87 women."

The problems the dyers have to face are innumerable. "We live too far from the workplace. The price of the premises we jointly rent is too high, but it's very difficult to find landlords who will rent to us, as they're afraid that our dyes will spoil their property. There is no water supply in the district where we work and we have to pay MRO 500 (€1.60) for each barrel of water for the dye; it's very expensive. We do not have a fixed outlet for our goods. A market stall is too expensive, so we work as street vendors, living in fear of the police and the 'protection' racket in the street aimed at making us flee from the commercial areas." In many cases, the domestic situation of these women is also very difficult. "Many of them have polygamous husbands. On the days their husbands are with one of their other wives when they return home in the evening, they have to take care of feeding the children alone. It's very difficult to manage the family budget, as their husbands are often day-labourers or dockers for exam-



ple, who don't have a fixed income. The dyeing products are highly toxic. Many of the women working in our cramped premises amid the toxic fumes rising from the dyeing vats carry children on their backs or on their knees, others are pregnant."

### IN NEED OF A GUARANTEE

"We are trying to set up a mutual fund but are having problems as we are not able to provide a guarantee. We would like to buy the basic white cloth wholesale, but the wholesalers set very short payment deadlines, which is too risky for us. We need a loan that would serve as a guarantee. We would also like to undertake training at the union. Thanks to the CGTM's sectoral committee for dyers, we now have contacts with other dyers from other districts. We like our trade, we have a lot of energy and know-how and we would like to

continue in this line of work, but we need help. All the women who work here are incredibly motivated, but they also have very high expectations. I'm afraid; I hope that the union can really help us, so that they are not disappointed." ●

*Publisher responsible at law: Guy Ryder,  
General secretary*

### ICFTU

5 Bld du Roi Albert II, Bte 1,  
1210-Brussels, Belgium  
Tel:...+32 2 2240211, Fax:...+32 2 2015815  
E-Mail: [press@icftu.org](mailto:press@icftu.org)  
Web Site: <http://www.icftu.org>

*Report (articles and photos) and Editor in  
Chief: Natacha David*

*Layout: Vicente Cepedal*