

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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Spotlight interview with Naima Bouguerjouma (Morocco - UMT)

"Women have understood that joining a union provides them with more rights"

Brussels, 17 January 2007 (ITUC Online): Naima Bouguerjouma, women's coordinator and staff union representative at a polyclinic in Marrakech, tells us about the day to day fight for health workers' right to breastfeed at work, to stop sexual harassment, and gain access to positions of responsibility. She was the first woman to occupy the post of general supervisor at the polyclinic and is optimistic about the future of Moroccan women, who are asserting their rights with ever-greater determination.

When and why did you get involved in the trade union movement?

In 1984, after obtaining a State diploma from the French Red Cross, I started to work at a polyclinic in Casablanca. I then came to work in Marrakech, in 1995. I joined the union in 1986. Having seen the union's good work and how it defended the workers, I decided that I should become a member. I'm 46 years old and have three children. My husband gives me a lot of support; he's a trade unionist himself, in the hotel and restaurant sector.

What specific problems do the women workers at your polyclinic face?

The polyclinic employs 140 members, 75% of whom are women. The difficulty in ensuring respect for the right to breastfeeding breaks at work is a major concern. Women do have the right to breastfeed at work, but it's difficult to organise at night. We try to organise ourselves the best we can so that young mothers don't have to work nights; it's a question of solidarity. Until recently, women could not hold positions of responsibility at the clinic, but that's changing now.

In 2003, you rose to the post of general supervisor. How did you manage that?

This post had been reserved for men up until then, but thanks to the trade union fight, I was able to become the first woman to take on this role. Women workers have to live with the fear of sexual and moral harassment, but when there are women in positions of responsibility, they feel more at ease, they feel more confident and work more efficiently.

I'm also in charge of training and retraining the nurses, to keep them up to date with new procedures.

Is sexual harassment common?

Yes, there have been several cases, but we managed to resolve them without creating a scandal, because the women wanted protect their families. But women are becoming increasingly confident about speaking out; some don't hesitate to respond on the spot, in front of everyone, when a man harasses them.

Do you think the "Women for Unions - Unions for Women" (*) campaign launched in Morocco has already produced concrete results?

There are many more women wanting to join the union thanks to the campaign. Women now form a large majority in the unions in my sector; they have understood that joining a union provides them with more rights.

What are your most pressing demands?

One of the major problems is that the workers who leave are not replaced. We are fighting to obtain replacements and temporary staff to cover our holidays. At the moment, when someone takes leave, the workload becomes too heavy for the others, all the more so now that compulsory health insurance has been instated and there's a lot more work than before.

How has the role of women evolved within the UMT?

The majority of the trade union members in my sector are women. At local level, the trade union is composed of 75% women and 25% men. At the level of the national federation, there are 50% women and 50% men, but men hold all the positions of responsibility. The overall proportion of women in the UMT remains very low.

But we are starting to assert ourselves, to claim our rightful place. I'm optimistic. Women are becoming aware of their rights and obligations; they are fighting for more responsibilities and, believe me, we're not being given any presents, it's the fruit of a real struggle.

Moroccan women are increasingly opening up to the world, to the development question. The family and social context is evolving. Men are starting to let their women go out more easily to take part in meetings. It's compensation for the fact that they are making a financial contribution. We mustn't stop, we have to press forward with a long term vision in favour of women's rights, we have to continue to progress otherwise we'll go backwards.

In September, you took part in the seminar to assess the campaign in favour of women's rights in unions, carried out in Morocco and Algeria, in the framework of the ITUC global campaign "Unions for women- Women for unions"(*). What have you learnt from the exchanges with your Algerian sisters?

In global terms, we share the same problems. But on listening to my Algerian sisters, I realised that union access to factories is easier in Algeria than here in Morocco, where the employer rules the roost. It's a different system.

Having reached the end of the seminar, how do you think the work

underway could be improved on in the future?

I feel that we lack assessment skills. It is a vital skill when it comes to drawing lessons from what hasn't worked and how to do things differently in the future. We also need more information about what's happening in other regions and other sectors. The communication needed to compare situations better is often lacking.

Interview by Natacha David.

(*) Also read the ITUC briefing about this campaign at
http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/maroc_EN.pdf

- Also read the interview of Samira Kinami (Morocco - UMT),
"Unionised... and fired on the spot!" at
<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article514&lang=en>

Also read the interview of Asma Elbassir (Morocco - UMT), "Giving
greater visibility to young people" at
<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article509&lang=en>

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