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Spotlight interview with Jehan Seleem Ahmed (Iraqi Kurdistan- KGWSU)

"There is room for young women who dare to express themselves in the union"

Brussels, 9 December 2008 (ITUC OnLine): Having benefited from training programmes offered by the international trade union movement, 24-year-old Jehan Ahmed is now a trainer with the Kurdish trade union KGWSU in the province of Dohuk. Working in the beauty salon sector, she underlines how the image of trade unions has improved in the eyes of the young women workers in the region.

How did you first get involved in the trade union movement?

I have been an activist for many years. I started in 2003, when was 19 years old. I understood, being a worker myself, what it is to have difficulties at work and to feel that no one wants to defend you, that no one is interested, least of all the employers or the authorities. In my sector, beauty salons, the government had set artificially high prices for the products. But these prices didn't correspond to the market reality, no one had the money to pay so much and it was impossible to make a reasonable income or to pay employees a decent wage; we didn't even earn enough to cover the rent on the salon. So I went to see the authorities in charge of price controls in the province of Dohuk. They informed me that they couldn't do anything, that it was a matter for the central government. I was working with 13 employees who were dependent on me at the time and I must admit that I would never have thought of turning to a trade union back then, but I gradually came to the realisation that no one else could help. I went to the union to question them about the link between the defence of prices and the defence of workers, the defence of all those women working in shops or salons and who cannot make ends meet.

With the support of the union, I went to see the administrator of the province, who had just been appointed, fortunately, and was therefore better disposed than his predecessor. I presented the problem to him, insisting that his role was to defend and protect the people. He listened to me and my colleagues and, as a result, the law on set prices was repealed and the beauty salons were able to sell their products at prices suited to the market.

What is the union doing for you now?

I have acquired a lot of knowledge and new experiences through the union, as have all the women working in my salon and other beauty salons that have also joined the union. There are over 80 salons employing at least two to three women. In the private beauty salon sector alone, there are 54 workers affiliated to the union in Dohuk. The women in this sector are confronted, first and foremost, with difficulties linked to social protection, health insurance and low incomes, so there are a lot of problems to work on.

How well informed are workers about their rights in Kurdistan?

Before 1991, we were under the yoke of Saddam Hussein's regime and Law 150, under which most workers were classed as state employees and were therefore deprived of the right to organise. When Kurdistan became an autonomous region, the Kurdish government did not take any steps to inform Kurdish workers about their rights. A great deal of work needs to be done in terms of information and awareness raising.

Was it this realisation that led you to get involved in trade union education for women?

When I joined the union in 2003, after the fall of Baghdad and following discussions with other women from the union, we decided to organise a workshop on women's rights and to go out to meet women in their workplaces. We have organised workshops in every single town in the province, even the most remote.

In 2004, I attended my first training course, in Jordan, within the framework of an international trade union project on Iraq (*). In 2006, I became a trade union educator and was made head of women's education within the KGWSU, after having taken part in various seminars organised by Solidarity (*) Center, which taught me how to get the message across to women workers in Kurdistan. There is a good level of education in Kurdistan and it is not too difficult to convince women to join a union. There are other regions in Iraq where it would be unthinkable for a man to let his wife take part in a seminar abroad. Here, mentalities are evolving.

Does your trade union involvement not raise any problems in your family circle?

I have not been married for very long and my husband lets me go away to attend seminars abroad, like here in Brussels, on the occasion of this European mission giving us an opportunity to take part in the ITUC Committee for the Middle East. When I was engaged to be married, I was invited to a seminar for the first time, in Jordan. My fiancé's and his family's first reaction was to try and persuade me not to go. But my enthusiasm finally convinced him and now the entire family wholeheartedly supports the values I defend through my involvement in the trade union. It's the same for many of my colleagues, whose husbands and families are also evolving in the right direction. Take the example of a colleague of mine (she's pregnant), whose husband is from a region in central Iraq where the cultural environment severely restricts women's freedoms. Little by little, she started to take part in seminars in Kurdistan and also in Amman, in Jordan. She invited us to her home to meet her family, and since then she has been actively involved in the trade union movement. The education workshops have helped us a great deal in this sense. In the past, people would point the finger of shame at a woman joining a trade union. There is a much more positive image of trade unions now.

Do you, as a young woman, face discrimination within your union?

I don't feel that women are discriminated within the union. If the women are strong and have the courage to express their views, there is room for them, even for young women like myself.

Interview by Natacha David

(*) The ITUC supports the regular education activities for Iraqi trade unionists held by the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center in Iraq itself or in Jordan. The ITUC, in conjunction with the ILO and its other partner organisations, has also repeatedly condemned the murders and violent attacks targeting a number of Iraqi trade unionists. The international trade union movement is closely following the developments regarding the labour code in Iraq.

- Further information on trade union rights violations is also available in the chapter devoted to Iraq in the latest ITUC Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights:

<http://survey08.ituc-csi.org/survey.php?IDContinent=5&IDCountry=IRO&Lang=EN>

- Also see the interview of Hashemiyya Muhsin Hussein (Iraq - GFIW), entitled, "It's becoming more and more risky for an Iraqi woman to work", at: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article1643&lang=en>

- The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 311 national affiliates. <http://www.ituc-csi.org>
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