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Spotlight interview with Rahdia Belhadj Zekri (UGTT, Tunisia)

"Equality in unions in the south of the Mediterranean? It is high time recommendations were translated into action!"

Brussels, 17 March 2009 (ITUC OnLine): What challenges and obstacles stand in the way of equality in the countries of the southern Mediterranean? What progress has been made and what action needs to be taken? Women from five trade union centres from the region (Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia) took stock of the situation during a recent conference in Tunisia, within the framework of the Euromed Trade Union Forum.

Rahdia Belhadj Zekri, a founding member of the UGTT women's committee and coordinator of the summary report (1) on the findings of this conference, explains how the place of women is evolving in society at large and in trade unions in particular, and calls for more concrete action and democracy.

How is the place of women evolving in the private sphere?

With the exception of Tunisia, Family Codes still give women a minor role, despite a number of remarkable steps forward, especially in Morocco, where the most significant break was seen, in 2004, with the former Personal Status Code. In Algeria too, a number of reforms in favour of women have finally been made, such as the amendments to fight early marriage. In Jordan, restrictions have been placed on polygamy. In Palestine, the laws introduced by the Palestinian Authority have brought about positive changes, but personal status is still largely dependent on religious laws, Muslim or Christian. Women have been fighting hard across the region, and that's what has made these reforms and amendments possible. It's encouraging, but still not enough.

The four countries have also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but with many reservations on matters such as nationality or marriage that limit its impact, unfortunately.

Much progress has been made regarding the schooling of girls in Arab countries. Is illiteracy really being wiped out?

The rate of schooling among girls in primary and secondary schools is equal to that of boys, and even higher in Jordan, Tunisia and the Occupied Palestinian Territory. But discrimination remains marked in terms of the field of study: boys still form a huge majority in the technical branches, which are more promising in terms of job opportunities.

Illiteracy rates are, indeed, falling, but they remain higher for women than for men, and the figures vary according to the country. In Morocco, despite

a strong campaign, it is still 66% for women and 40% for men.

What is the situation as regards women's participation in political life in the region?

It is still weak: women account for 23% of the members of parliament in Tunisia, 11% in Morocco, and 6% in Algeria and Jordan. Their presence is owed, to a large extent, to the campaigning of women's movements in these countries, which has led to the introduction of quotas, like in Jordan and Palestine. As regards ministerial positions, the presence of a few women in Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia remains largely symbolic and is restricted to areas considered to be the traditional reserve of women, such as health, childhood, culture and, of course, women's affairs.

The five countries concerned have all signed the ILO conventions concerning discrimination against women (100, 111 and 122) and have incorporated the prohibition of any form of discrimination into their national laws. But what is the situation in practice?

The progress made in the field of education is not reflected in women's participation in the economy. Their presence on the labour market remains weak, and there are wide disparities between countries as well as between urban and rural areas.

Inequalities remain in terms of pay, hierarchy and promotion - the infamous "glass ceiling". Women generally find themselves in lower paid and less stable jobs than men, and are highly concentrated in the agricultural sector. Their rate of unemployment is higher. In Palestine, women in the private sector are paid 60% of the salary paid to men for work of equal value.

Is the region seeing any change in mentalities as regards sexual harassment in the workplace?

In Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia, reforms have been made to the penal code, to make sexual harassment a punishable offence. But it is still far from enough, as such practices are still hushed up on the whole. Women trade unionists are mobilising, especially in Algeria, to step up awareness raising and to push for the protection of witnesses.

Specific structures for women have been set up within the five trade union confederations. What impact have they had?

Women have, indeed, managed to set up women's committees within trade union confederations, with a view to defending gender-specific demands. Despite the campaigns waged by these structures and the training they have received, plus the significant increase in female membership and their participation at the grassroots, women continue to be virtually nonexistent at the top of the trade union hierarchy. Their representation is particularly weak within the executive and decision-making structures. In Tunisia, for example, there is not a single woman on the executive bureau. Progress has been made, however, in Algeria, where there have been 15 women on the national executive committee since 2008.

What factors contribute to the underrepresentation of women in trade unions?

One is the social and cultural context in general and another is the trade unions themselves. A number of social factors are behind the gap between the actual role played by women in society and the representation we have within it. Although women are increasingly expected to contribute to the household income by working, there is still as much intolerance regarding their absence from the home, and they continue to have as much difficulty combining work and domestic tasks, as the men in their families still fail to participate equally. So how can women who are already struggling to cope with this dual workload be expected to take on the triple workload their involvement in the trade union would imply? Their day-to-day lives are complicated even further by the lack of crèches, childcare facilities and school canteens. In the most precarious sectors, where the proportion of women workers is very high, trade union activity also exposes them to the risk of sanction, or even dismissal.

At cultural level, the public space, and therefore the trade union world, continues to be seen as the reserve of men. Women in Arab societies find it very difficult to mark their presence in a mixed space. The patriarchal vision of women and the tendency to undervalue them, and female trade union activists in particular, continue to have a major impact. Women often interiorise this combination of factors, which generates a lack of confidence, low self esteem, inhibition and, occasionally, reticence to confront public spaces and to persevere in the fight for parity.

What are the obstacles particular to the trade union world?

The absence of concrete measures (choice of meeting times, absence of crèches or child care facilities) within the unions themselves does nothing to encourage the participation of women. There are also conservative elements within trade unions that are reticent to see women taking part in public life. Finally, the lack of democracy within unions themselves puts many women off and sometimes sways them towards women's organisations instead.

What strategies could be developed to promote gender equality within trade unions and to integrate women at all decision-making levels.

We have formulated a number of recommendations. It is essential that we encourage the unionisation of women, especially those working in the informal economy, and promote trade union policies that integrate the gender dimension and are geared towards defending the most vulnerable workers, such as women.

We need to promote women's access to decision-making posts by introducing proportional and progressive quotas, as well as by strengthening their leadership capacities. Women's specific needs within unions must be recognised, and we must continue to raise women's awareness as to the usefulness of unions in promoting improvements in their specific condition. We must also strengthen the role of trade unions and develop services specifically geared towards women workers. Building relations based on solidarity and complementarities with other civil society organisations is also crucial.

But the main conclusion of our work is that it is high time that these recommendations, which have already been formulated so many times, were translated into action plans and programmes, backed by agendas, support measures, assessment and monitoring.

You also insist on the need to campaign for more democracy and transparency in order to make progress in the fight for equality...

Achieving equality represents a huge challenge and requires sweeping reforms of trade union structures and workings, to make them more decentralised, more democratic and more transparent. It is a fight that not only has to be waged inside the unions but also within society at large. The unions must fight with all their might for democracy in their respective countries and work with other civil society organisations to build an open and pluralistic political environment that will champion the values of equality and justice.

Interview by Natacha David

(1) "Women and Unions in Southern Mediterranean Countries: Summary Report", adopted during the Euromed Trade Union Forum conference on "Women and Unions", held in Hammamet, Tunisia, from 23 to 25 February and attended by some 50 male and female trade unionists from the region (Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia).

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