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Spotlight Interview with Diatou Khady Cissé (SYNPICS -Senegal)

“We need to build bridges to mobilise men to fight for equality too”

Brussels, 28 September (ITUC OnLine): Diatou Khady Cissé, editor-in-chief of Senegal's national television station, is president of the Senegalese journalists' union(SYNPICS), and vice-president of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ*), the first African woman to hold such a post. She believes the media can still be very male chauvinist, like the society she comes from. She emphasises the need to target training at decision-makers in the media, and to integrate a gender dimension at every level of the global development dynamic.

How have you combined your professional career with your commitment to equality?

It's true that I have worked on women's issues a lot. I took some time out of the newsroom to work in private organisations. I was the communications officer for the AFVP (the French Association of Volunteers for Progress) an international NGO. Afterwards I became director of a project for empowering women and promoting women's rights, funded by Canadian development cooperation. Finally I was head of the Resource Development and Communication's Department at Aide et Action, a French international NGO. I am currently a television producer and president of the Senegalese journalist's union, SYNPICS.

What progress has been made in equality issues in your professional environment ?

Equality has slowly but steadily progressed in the newsrooms. We often seem to forget that the media is still a very male chauvinist world. Journalists are not always the most progressive of people; they come from the same cultural background as their public. It is understandable therefore that all the sexist stereotypes we find throughout society are also present in the media.

What prejudices and stereotypes persist?

Women in the media are seen as women first, and journalists second. This sexist divide explains why women are to a large extent confined to the so-called social interest subjects while men deal with the political, scientific and economic issues. There are several factors keeping these obstacles in place: women in the media have internalised the roles attributed to them. Strategic posts on editorial teams are still monopolized by men to a large extent. The decision-making men in the media have often completely jettisoned equality issues. There have developed a resistance of course and yet they are rarely the target of gender training. The status quo in the media is considered completely normal. Media professionals need

to put on « gender » glasses to get a clearer view of their working environment.

What, in your view, are the best ways of tackling these attitudes?

Gender promotion requires profound change; it is no small matter. Everyone knows that social change is a long term process. I think the equality debate should take place everywhere, and we need to deconstruct the way our societies are organised so that people realise that there is nothing innate about gender roles, they have simply been constructed. States also need to show real political will. It is not about having a ministry for women, just to keep up with the times. Gender must be present at every level of a strategy for African development. You cannot make progress by leaving half the human race behind.

The problem of violence against women still receives inadequate coverage in the media. How in your view is the Senegalese media progressing on this front ?

Personally I believe the media have done a lot to legitimise the fight against violence against women. Not a day goes by when they don't talk about it. It is true however that the way they report this violence still leaves a lot to be desired. The tone of the articles and the words they use often don't convey the seriousness of the situations. Furthermore, some include in their reports stereotypical comments that abuse and stigmatise the women, or hold them responsible. There is also the need to respect the women's anonymity and their dignity, which is crucial.

How did your commitment to trade unionism begin ?

To be honest, I came to the trade union movement almost by accident. My trade unionism is an extension of my commitment to equality. At a certain point I felt there was no reason to leave men to fight the battle alone, so I joined the ranks. With my feminist background, I soon began to speak out on behalf of women. I quickly made my way up to the decision-making levels, until I got to where I am today, at the head of my union. This same process later led me to the IFJ, where I am now a vice-president. It is the first time an African woman has held this position.

What is the role of women in the Senegalese journalists' union ? What policies do you think could help them make progress ?

They are very courageous, even though there aren't many of them at the top level. My arrival at the helm of my union triggered something. More and more women are becoming leaders of branch unions, and those who sit on the executive committee with me are becoming increasingly assertive and showing leadership potential.

Can you explain how the Senegalese media deal, for example, with the rights of women domestic workers ?

I don't have the impression that they focus on this specifically. The Senegalese media like all others concentrate on subjects that sell, like politics. But it is important to take it further. If the people working in this field do not develop a real communications strategy that includes a

strategic partnership with the media, there is a strong risk that there will not be any sustained interest in these subjects by the media.

When it comes to the dramatic stories about illegal migration, has there been any specific coverage of young women by the media ?

When a boat runs aground somewhere, they talk about it, but no more than that. Here again there is a need to go beyond this symptomatic approach. The Senegalese media often don't have the means to carry out in-depth investigations into the whole chain, and the motives that lead people to leave the country for the mirage of Europe. It is frustrating to see that our foreign colleagues, less affected by this than we are, have the means to do this sort of reporting. Given that it is difficult to report on this subject in depth in general, obviously women are not the target of any specific reporting.

The ITUC's World Women's Conference is to be held in October 2009, on the theme "Decent Work Decent Life for Women - trade unions taking the lead in the fight for economic and social justice and equality". What does this theme mean to you, and your daily reality ?

I think this theme is highly relevant. Women have the right to fulfilment, as workers, mothers and wives. It is unfair that they are forced to choose because of their gender. These are three key dimensions in the life of a woman, and for the harmony of family life, and of society in general. Women have the right to decent work and a decent life, with all those key dimensions.

As a media professional and a trade unionist, what message would you like to convey to women trade unionists from all the regions who will be taking part in this event?

Stay mobilised, be determined, but also build the bridges that will bring men on board. Not all of them at first, but those who are open to discussing equality, those who understand the aim of the fight for gender equality.

Interview by Natacha David

(*) See the International Federation of Journalists declaration on "Ethics and Gender: Equality in the newsroom", Brussels 30-31 May 2009 at
<http://www.ifj.org/assets/docs/087/136/90a2c57-ec33088.doc>

This declaration was published at the end of the IFJ conference attended by Diatou Khady Cissé in Brussels, together with 60 other journalists from around the world.

-For more information on IFT gender policies go to :
<http://www.ifj.org/en/pages/gender-issues>

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