

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

ITUC OnLine

196/191109

Spotlight interview with Rosane Sasse (UGT-Brazil)

"Domestic violence has direct repercussions on the victim's working life."

Brussels, 19 November 2009 (ITUC OnLine): Gender equality is at the heart of the fight for decent work. Rosane Sasse, assistant secretary of the UGT (1) Women's Committee and vice president of the garment, textile and leather sector union STIV (2), reviews some of her union's priorities: organising the informal economy, equal pay and combating moral harassment...

Has the global economic crisis had major repercussions on the Brazilian garment sector?

The global economic crisis has, of course, affected Brazil, but not in the area where I work – clothing and textiles – in the south of the country, as our factories produce for the Brazilian market. On the contrary, employers are looking for more and more skilled labour, but at the same time are using the crisis as a pretext for paying lower wages. Brazilian legislation provides for annual collective bargaining. The last negotiations were held in May 2009 and the employers were unremitting in their insistence that the crisis is on our sector's doorstep. They were trying to alarm us, saying that the downturn affecting the automobile and metal industry will also affect us, and thus managed to block any improvement in working and pay conditions.

What are your trade union's priorities?

Although we are not directly affected by the crisis, we are facing other problems, such as Chinese clothing imports to Brazil. Some companies change the labels to sell them as goods "Made in Brazil". Another problem is that more and more employers are pushing their employees to work from home, using arguments they know women want to hear, such as, it will give them more time with their children. It is a trend that has been growing for a long time now, but it has been intensified over the last six years. Home workers do not have the same social security coverage, and the tendency to use informal workers also weakens unions' ability to organise, as they are more accustomed to working with the formal economy. In some instances, trade union structures act as barriers, making it difficult to organise the women working in the informal economy. We offer our members assistance with medical care, which is funded through the dues they pay. Extending this to women in the informal economy would be financially difficult, as it would mean that all our members would have to show solidarity with these women, who are not always able to pay their dues.

What proportion of the garment sector operates informally?

Where I live in Jaraguá do Sul (Santa Catarina), 30,000 out of the city's 130,000 inhabitants work in the textile and garment sector: 22,000 in the formal economy (80% are women) and 8,000 in the informal economy. Our union is constantly working to make women in the informal economy aware of the importance of associating, of unionising, but some of them, in turn, subcontract other informal economy workers. They become "small bosses" of a sort and consider unionisation to be a conflict of interest. In some cases they exploit a whole family through subcontracting, including the children.

Do you, in spite of all this, manage to organise these informal economy workers?

Yes. They are invited to take part in all our activities and we are constantly working to raise their awareness about their rights. We offer them legal assistance, we contact the

"small bosses" to press them to respect their legal obligations as regards the minimum wage, for example. If they refuse any form of dialogue, we initiate legal proceedings. We also work with the Labour Ministry and can call on it for assistance when we detect a large informal economy manufacturing unit that does not apply the minimum standards.

You are the coordinator of the women's secretariat at your union, STIV. What are its priorities?

We are working in line with one of the UGT's priorities, which is to integrate the decent work issue in all our actions. At the moment, we are fighting to cut the working week from 44 to 40 hours. This battle is very important to women, given their family responsibilities. Another priority area is health, as eight out of ten women are affected by work-related illnesses. We are also working to improve maternity protection: maternity leave is four months at the moment, but new legislation will extend it to six months as of 2010, but this does not systematically apply to all companies, so we have to fight for this.

You took part in the first ITUC World Women's Conference (3), which addressed the issue of violence against women. What are the most pervasive forms of gender violence in Brazil?

The most common form is domestic violence. It directly affects a woman's working life, as the physical or moral damage is so great that she will not be able to concentrate as much on her work. In addition, over the last three years, more and more women are complaining of psychological and moral harassment in the workplace. This doesn't mean that the number of cases has increased, but a study by the University of São Paulo was widely publicised and has really raised awareness on the issue. One example of psychological violence is when a worker airs a grievance and her boss reacts angrily, reprimanding and constantly humiliating her in front of the other workers, constantly reproaching her. She gradually feels worse and worse and the pressure can lead to depression. A number of court cases have led to a recognition of moral harassment and the payment of damages, and this has encouraged more and more people to speak about the problem.

This type of violence affects both genders, but it is usually worse when it comes to women. Male workers tend to react rapidly to such problems, whilst women are more likely to keep quiet, to keep it to themselves, until they cannot take any more and fall into depression. Numerous cases of psychological violence have been observed against women returning from maternity leave: many employers want to get rid of them as they think they'll be off work more after having children.

Is there a large pay gap between men and women performing the same tasks with the same skills or qualifications?

The minimum wage in Brazil is 465 reais (270 dollars). It is 700 reais in the textile and garment sector in my region. On average, women workers in the sector earn around 800 reais and the men earn around 1000 reais. This pay gap between men and women also applies for the same task requiring the same skills. Our union is fighting against this injustice. When we speak to employers, they are not able to justify it; they use unconvincing arguments such as "men are able to carry heavier loads". We go to court to denounce these wage gaps, but systematically lose: the judges, who are usually men, find small justifications such as slight differences in working hours or the tasks performed. I think it's more of a cultural problem than anything else.

Is it difficult for a woman to climb the trade union hierarchy in Brazil?

Yes. The first obstacle is the family: there are a lot of meetings, a lot of time has to be

devoted to trade union activities, which creates tension at home, with the husbands. It leads to a lot of divorces (as it did in my case). It's a difficult problem to overcome. Another barrier to women reaching decision-making positions is their lack of self confidence. They need a great deal of training to build up their self esteem. Many unions establish quotas for women's participation in leadership structures, but their application is distorted in some instances: women only reach secondary, assistant leadership positions. Machismo remains quite present.

What did you draw from the first ITUC World Women's Conference?

I was impressed by the discussions on climate change. It is talked about in Brazil, but not enough, even though we are suffering the effects. Eighteen months ago, the union from my region had launched a campaign on the subject, but so few of our members and the public took part in it that it soon fizzled out. The ITUC Conference demonstrated to what extent it is a problem facing us all. I will be going back to Brazil with the desire to reactivate this campaign.

The Conference demonstrated that the problems facing Brazilian women are shared by a huge number of women from Africa, Asia and other parts of the world. It gives us the encouragement we need to keep up the fight. Many other women would have liked to take part in the Conference. As I have had the privilege of attending, I feel the need to share what I have learnt and to do everything possible to ensure that its resolutions are applied.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) União Geral dos Trabalhadores

(2) Sindicato dos Trabalhadores nas Indústrias do Vestuário, Fiação, Tecelagem e Artefatos de Couro de Jaraguá do Sul e Região, affiliated to the UGT.

(3) The first ITUC World Women's Conference was held in Brussels from 19 to 21 October 2009 under the heading "Decent Work, Decent Life for Women".

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