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Spotlight on Claudine Akakpo (CSTT- Togo)

« Confiage » is a modern form of child slavery

Brussels, 4 January 2010 (ITUC OnLine): According to Claudine Akakpo, assistant general secretary of the CSTT(1), hundreds of thousands of children are forced into domestic slavery in Togo. The trade union movement is mobilising against this exploitation.

The world is finally paying attention to the issue of domestic labour, notably in discussions due to be held at the June 2010 International Labour Conference. What is this sector like in Togo?

It is part of the informal economy. Many internal migrants leave the rural areas to work in the big towns. The recruitment of domestic workers often takes place through the "confiage" (entrustment) system, whereby a parent or an intermediary entrusts a child to a close family friend or another much better off person in Lomé or another big town. You can find children as young as five or six in this system. They are not paid anything directly, their parent or an intermediary takes the money then gives it to the family. The family does not really concern itself with the very difficult conditions the child has to face in Lomé.

The lowest salaries are about 5,000 CFA francs (approximately 8 euros) per month. As they live with their employer, they can be employed 24 hours day. Many of them get up at 4 o'clock in the morning and they are the last to go to bed. They work constantly: washing the floor, the dishes, going to the market, cooking meals....They are called "girl Fridays" ("bonne à tout faire" or literally "good for anything") because they really do do everything. They are supposedly given accommodation at the employer's house, but while the latter has their own bedroom, the maid has to make do with a mat or a piece of cloth that they roll out in a corner of the kitchen to sleep on...it's not really accommodation! It is a form of slavery because the child does not receive a direct salary. We have seen photographs of children who have been burnt, or scarred with knife cuts, it's horrific.

There are also adults who seek domestic employment for themselves. Their working conditions are harsh, but we are more concerned about the very young children who have this terrible exploitation imposed on them.

How many children are there in this situation?

Surveys have been carried out by NGOs such as Care International. In Lomé alone it is estimated that there are 250,000 children, most of them girls.

Is the Togolese government trying to combat this exploitation?

The Ministry for Social Action is running a campaign: as soon as it is

suspected that a child is being mistreated in a home, you can call 111 and the ministry will turn up to investigate. Our trade union is taking part in the campaign, called "Allo 111". It has led to a lot of complaints, hundreds of phone calls a day from throughout Togo. When the authorities find a mistreated child in a home, they do everything they can to find the child's family of origin. The family can receive assistance to help support the child if it was poverty that drove them to send their child into slavery.

Are there sanctions for the partners of this type of trafficking?

For the time being we are at the awareness raising stage. Sanctions may come in a second stage. Both the parents who subject their child to slavery and the employers should be punished. We have a law against child labour and child trafficking, but so far no-one has been taken to court for internal trafficking. There have been court rulings, however, about cross border trafficking.

What action are the Togolese trade unions taking to combat this extreme exploitation of children?

We are increasing the awareness of the parents who accept this kind of thing, both in Lomé and in their home towns and villages. We did this for example on the last World Day for Decent Work on 7 October. We show them photos and videos so that they can see just how much their children will suffer in Lomé to persuade them not to send them any more. Sometimes they plead poverty, but we reply that if that was the sole reason, every poor person would send their children out to work, but it is not the case. They need to have a greater sense of their own dignity in order to be able to also respect the rights of these children, including the right to education. The ILO wants to set up a project in association with the trade unions and NGOs to enable us to identify these parents, and grant them small loans for income-generating activities. Then they can no longer claim poverty as the reason for sending their children into the "confiage" system.

This situation has its roots in the past, in a traditional system that was better: less well off parents placed their children with better off relations who sent them to school. In return the children would carry out minor domestic tasks. This traditional system has been completely distorted. The employers take advantage of it, they don't give the child a salary, they sometimes promise to enrol them in school but they don't do it, and it is completely unregulated.

It is quite likely that some of the employers are among your members...

Yes. In our awareness-raising sessions we tell them that the children who work for them have rights, such as the right to a weekly rest day. They are sometimes surprised to learn that maids have the right to a rest day and they have to work for themselves on that day! It is difficult to convince them because for them, it is normal that a child who is in their home should work and that they should be able to tell them off as they do their own children. That is where the ill-treatment begins. People don't hit their own children as much as they do a child working as maid, who is sometimes punished with a whip or with a blade.

Would the adoption of an international convention on domestic workers help you in your action in Togo?

It could help us in several ways. First by redefining the minimum age for performing this kind of work. It is 18 in Togo, but as domestic work is in the informal economy, it is not regulated by the government. These are precarious jobs. A maid can be dismissed for the slightest mistake. They are not protected the laws guaranteeing a minimum wage, weekly rest or redundancy compensation.

An international standard could also help us on the question of wages. At the moment, maids don't even get the SMIG (the guaranteed minimum wage). When we talk to our members about this, they reply that if they had to pay their maids the minimum wage, they would have to be paid more themselves, because they cannot afford to spend half of their own salary on a maid. We try to make them understand that if they don't have the means to employ a maid at home, they should do the housework themselves. It's a delicate issue, because if people who cannot pay proper wages decide to abandon their maids, what will become of them? We don't want to find these girls on the street, working as prostitutes or thieving...

In more general terms, what are your union's priorities for gender equality?

Togolese girls are often deprived of education because traditionally boys have been given priority. Without any training, many women have to turn to the informal economy, where jobs are precarious, pay is too low, and there is no social protection. We have programmes to help them find income-generating activities, and we train them to manage their commercial ventures. To offset the lack of social protection, we have set up mutual health insurance societies. It is not easy, because it is not in our culture to provide for the future, we live from day to day. People don't feel the need to belong to a mutual society for health protection, just as they don't believe in insurance generally. It is only when they are faced with a problem that they recognise the benefits. Our national centre has more than 100,000 members, but barely 2,000 of them belong to the mutual society.

Is there a big difference between men's and women's pay in Togo?

In law, there is no discrimination, but women workers pay more income tax than their husbands, because under our Code of the Person and the Family a wife is a dependent. This difference affects family allowances too: as a woman is a dependent she can receive the family allowance unless her husband authorises it, while he automatically has the right to it. These discrepancies in income tax and family allowance can make a difference of nearly 15% between the real salaries of men and women in the same grade.

Is it harder for a woman to rise up the hierarchy at work?

Yes, and it is primarily a problem of attitude. In the sector where I work, communications, there are no women chief editors. It was not until 2006 that we saw a woman appointed as a director in the media. Out of 30 media entities, only five women have a management post. The difficulty women have reaching decision making posts is reflected in political life: there are only seven women in a parliament of 81 members and in the government only four of the 20 posts are held by women.

What is happening in the trade unions?

Of our six national centres, not one has a woman general secretary, but in my confederation we are trying to achieve a better balance. Two of us are women assistant general secretaries and we are among the four women on the 17-member executive board. Women make up one third of our 100,000 members.

You were one of the delegates at the ITUC's World Women's Conference(2), where one of the themes was combating violence against women. What is the situation in Togo?

Regrettably there is sexual harassment in many workplaces. As trade unions we try to make the harassers more aware of the implications of their acts, but so far there hasn't been a trial to condemn these acts or to draw wider attention in the media. There isn't even a law against sexual harassment. There are laws against rape and incest but nothing else. So it means the perpetrator has to go beyond harassment before they can be prosecuted.

What did you gain from this conference?

The conference showed that the problems Togolese women faced are experienced by many women around the world. I learnt a lot listening to others talk about how they fought against violence against women. It was encouraging to hear an ILO official talk to us about what was being foreseen to help child domestic workers in the future, so that we can help them escape this exploitation and help adults obtain a decent job. I also appreciated the information about climate change at this Conference. It is a crucial issue and in my country the unions have not taken it fully on board yet, although it is a threat to us all, workers or not.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) The Workers' Trade Union Confederation of Togo (Confédération syndicale des travailleurs du Togo). Claudine Akakpo is also responsible for gender, equality and women's issues in the CSTT.

(2) The First ITUC World Women's Conference, held in Brussels from 19 to 21 October 2009, on the theme "Decent Work, Decent Life for Women".
(http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/DECENT_WORK_DECENT_LIFE_FOR_WOMEN.pdf)

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