



International
Labour
Organization

Women and Trade Unions in Arab States: Decent Work Through Organizing

Background

The ITUC's first World Women's Conference held in Brussels in October 2009 concluded that "women have increasingly become part of the paid workforce and of trade unions, and there have been important achievements in organizing, collective bargaining, and rights"¹. Indeed, international experience shows that women workers have gone a long way in trade union activism: in Greece, a group of young women established the Mobile Telecom Company Union and negotiated a collective agreement reducing working time and providing for maternity leave. In India, self-employed women succeeded in organizing themselves and formed the Self Employed Women Association (SEWA) in order to work towards security of income and food and socially in terms of health pensions and childcare. Moreover trade unions all over the world have launched successful campaigns to increase female membership such as the ITUC campaign "Unions for Women, Women for Unions" to organize women in export processing zones and different sectors. The campaign also included North African countries.²

However, the abovementioned conclusion of the first World Women's Conference goes on to state that, as highlighted in the ILO report on Global Employment Trends for Women 2009, women are "often in a disadvantaged position in comparison to men in labour markets around the world [and that] in most regions, the gender impact of the economic crisis in terms of unemployment rates is expected to be more detrimental for females than for males". Actually, according to the ILO Global Employment Trends 2012 report, despite the low rate of women's participation in the labour force (18.4 percent, as opposed to 51.1 percent worldwide) compared to men (74 percent), the unemployment rate for women (20 percent as opposed to 6.4 percent worldwide) is more than two times higher than for men (8.8 percent) in the Middle East. Moreover, 42.1 percent of women in the Middle East are in vulnerable employment compared to 27 percent for men.³

¹ ITUC. 2009. "1st World Women's Conference: Conclusions and Recommendations". <http://www.ituc-csi.org/1st-world-women-s-conference,4822.html>

² ITUC. 2008. "Achieving Gender Equality: A Trade Union Manual". <http://www.ituc-csi.org/achieving-gender-equality-a-trade.html>

³ ILO. 2012. "Global Employment Trends 2012". Geneva.

Rationale

There have been many programmes targeting women in the Arab region in an attempt to improve labour legislation related to women workers as well as to integrate women into trade unions and leadership positions, and other related interventions. However, efforts were not as fruitful as was hoped.

Trade unions in the region are still lagging behind in terms of integrating women workers' concerns and demands into their activities and platforms. Trade union initiatives rarely include women's concerns in their collective bargaining agreements. Indeed women unionization rates are low in the region, not to mention the very low level of representation of women in Arab trade unions in general. In fact, it is not an easy task to find exact numbers on union density in Arab countries, not to mention the quasi-absence of disaggregated data for trade union membership. In Jordan⁴ and Bahrain, women constitute 20 percent of union memberships. In Lebanon, women are absent from the councils of more than 600 trade unions.

The absence of a strong presence of women in workers' movements in the region has resulted in the development of other forms of civil society activism to give them a voice. NGOs advocating for women's issues have stepped in and highlighted the need to promote equal rights for women in general and women workers in particular, including women workers with disabilities and other discriminated groups. However, the work of these organizations has mostly centred on psychological support and assistance and is no substitute for trade union activism, as achieved by collective bargaining and organizing.

Moreover, some post-Arab Spring governments have taken steps to deny women many of the basic rights that have been acquired through long struggles under past regimes. These developments have made the issue of integrating women workers into trade unions all the more pressing, in order for their voice to be heard.

Undoubtedly, trade unions have an important role to play in achieving decent and productive work and equal opportunities for women and other disadvantaged groups of workers. Participating, organizing and including women and women's concerns in collective bargaining initiatives, as well as reaching out to non-traditional, informal and vulnerable sectors where most labour violations occur (such as domestic work, atypical employment and EPZs) are key to promoting women workers' rights as well as to ensure that the principles of relevant international legal tools are realized, such as the ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)

⁴ ITUC. 2012. "Egypte, Jordanie, Tunisie: La place des femmes au travail". <http://www.ituc-csi.org/egypte-jordanie-tunisie-la-place.html>

and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), which are widely ratified in the Arab region but are not yet fully implemented.

Finally, trade unions and civil society must actively respond to demands for more social inclusion. Considering that gender equality is at the heart of decent work and that in Arab countries women are increasingly integrating into the labour market but face exacerbated discrimination, trade unions have a responsibility to embrace the cause of women workers as equal partners in achieving decent work, equal rights and inclusive societies.

Objectives

The current ILO project on “Strengthening Workers’ Organizations in Arab Countries through Economic, Social and Legal Literacy” (2012-2014) aims to help existing workers’ organizations to improve their structures to enhance democracy and representation, while at the same time helping workers establish alternative organizations when and where existing ones are compromised. Particular attention is given to the self-organizing of young workers and women workers, as an alternative to the usual practice of promoting the creation of separate committees for women and youth. Workers in the informal economy that are doubly marginalized are also targeted. Moreover, the project promotes networking between trade unionists, civil society activists, labour educators, labour researchers, as well as the media – as an alliance of like-minded advocates for social and economic transformation.

Based on the above, and building on the recommendations of the ITUC’s first World Women’s Conference, the regional workshop is intended to be a platform for trade unions to engage in open and constructive discussions amongst themselves, and with women workers and with pro-women NGOs, with the ultimate goal of promoting the rights of women workers.

The workshop’s objectives are as follows:

- To enable trade unions to acknowledge the value of women’s work and their role in workers’ organizations
- To help trade unions reflect on the obstacles preventing women from fully participating and voicing their needs in the trade union movement
- To assist trade unions and NGOs in promoting ideas that will increase women’s participation in workers’ organizations
- To build alliances between women NGOs and trade unions in terms of reaching out to women workers, and organizing and advancing their demands

- To provide a platform for dialogue between workers' unions and women NGOs
- To depict women's activism in light of today's challenges: what is its role in developing a rights system for women?
- To discuss new work and cooperation procedures that can be adopted in response to the pressuring obstacles facing women today and that empower women to reach decision-making positions within trade unions and civil society.
- To prepare for the tripartite regional forum on women's civil and socio-economic rights, that will be organised in February 2013.

Methodology

A regional workshop will be organized bringing together trade unions and leading NGOs. It will consist of:

- Analytical theoretical presentations analyzing trade unions from a gender perspective
- Presentations and discussions led by women workers and women NGOs, on the constraints and discrimination faced by women workers in the labour market and in trade unions
- An overview of the current practices regarding women workers in Arab trade unions, especially of women committees and their effectiveness
- Presentations of successful experiences in trade unions worldwide regarding the integration of women and the fight for the rights of women workers
- An elaboration of an action plan taking into consideration the current situation

The workshop will highlight workers needs and voices in informal employment, the care economy and domestic work. Special attention will be paid towards organizing and applying the ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111).

Outcomes

- Creating synergies, trade unions and women organizations in order to work on common issues and causes, regionally and nationally.
- Coming up with a set of recommendations as a starting point for plans and activities that will be centred on using ILO tools (such as the gender audit) and organizing. These recommendations will be the basis for national workshops that will be conducted in each country.

Participants Profiles

- Trade union representatives (female and male)
- Women/feminist NGO' representatives

- Countries: Lebanon, Jordan, Oman, occupied Palestinian territory, Bahrain, Yemen, Kuwait, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Algeria
- Venue: Crowne Plaza, Beirut, Lebanon
- Date: 4-6 February 2012