

Let the spring flowers blossom: The rise of Arab trade union women leaders

They continue to live with the realities of ongoing wars and revolutions, discrimination and abuse, but Arab women are finding ways to organise for a better future through sisterhood and trade union solidarity across borders.

Through an initiative made possible by PSI affiliates Kommunal, ST and VISION and sponsored by the Swedish trade union development organisation LO-TCO, 33 women trade unionists from across the Middle East and North Africa participated in a regional women's leadership conference in Tunis on 23-24 March 2013.

Union activists from Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Kuwait, Palestine, Canada, Belgium and Sweden shared experiences and brainstormed on ways to advance women's equality in their workplaces and respective countries.

"It was very useful to meet other women union leaders who fight against dictators, who fight against discrimination, and gain their rights. Women who prove to all the world that we can fight for our rights, and that we are on the same level with men—not behind them but with them—and that maybe sometimes we can do better than them!" said Dr. Randa Al-Khaldi, president of the women's committee of the General Trade Union of Workers in Health Services (GTUWAS) and national coordinator for PSI in Jordan.



In a poignant address to the group, Tunisian lawyer and women's rights activist Basma Khalfaoui said she had made a special effort to speak to this gathering of PSI women trade unionists "because women must lead the way for peace and equality in the MENA region." Khalfaoui's husband, Tunisian opposition leader and trade union supporter Chokri Belaïd, was assassinated by gunmen on 6 February in Tunis. The killers have yet to be brought to justice. Khalfaoui believes that the Ennadhha Movement, currently holding government leadership, is directly implicated.

Yamina Mghraoui, women's committee president with the Algerian independent public services union SNAPAP, highlighted the connection between neoliberal interests and growing attacks on workers: "Our challenges include how to face neoliberalism and multinational policies and the effect of capitalism on workers' rights and conditions – including mass dismissals and mounting unemployment. We need a clearer vision of the best ways to encourage and motivate women to join our unions and be active at levels of trade union structures. Trade union solidarity is also necessary to strengthen our organisations."

Al-Khaldi added that political voices need to be strengthened as well: "In Jordan, we have women representatives in parliament but we need them to be more active and speak out for women and workers."



Members reported that in some countries, including Jordan, Lebanon and Kuwait, less than 10% of union members are women, while in Tunisia that figure is closer to 50%. Union members emphasised that PSI's gender equality policy has had a significant impact in increasing the number of women union members in trade unions across the region, but that "there is still a long way to go to reach gender parity in top executive union positions."

Meeting chair Anan Qadri, general secretary of the Palestine Health Services Union-West Bank, said bluntly, "We don't see really serious commitment from executive councils in the Arab region to advance representation of women at top levels in unions. We call on these leaders to make a firm commitment to do this, or we must confront them."

She added, "I recommend to PSI that we have a mechanism to monitor and support gender issues. We know that sister Rosa [Pavanelli, PSI's new general secretary] believes in women's empowerment. Women are powerful, especially women in the Arab region who are part of these revolutions. We are fully aware of our potential and capacity, and we will move forward with the support of PSI and each other."

SNAPAP general secretary Nassira Ghozlane joined other union representatives who credit PSI's direct support for advancing women's rights and participation in trade unions across the region.

Qadri recounted that women became involved in unions in Palestine only after being introduced to union activism through PSI capacity-building projects. "Through policy and research surveys we have identified barriers to women's participation in unions; this has really helped us to outline proactive policies and to upgrade our skills. The surveys were followed by effective training programs including how to set gender equity strategies and work plans. PSI has had a very positive impact on women, empowering us."



At the same time, Qadri said, "We were inspired by the experience of trade union women who opened the way in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and more recently Egypt. Now we see more women attending and speaking at our meetings. Further to the PSI gender equality policy and training programs, PSI has enabled women to become trade union trainers; they have in turn inspired activists to organise in other sectors such as the textile industry."

Qadri also noted that a recent PSI Communications Actions Network forum held in Tunis has improved women's ability "to communicate about our issues through video, journalism, and social media skills training; we hope this program will be continued and expanded in the MENA region."

Moroccan Labour Union electricity sector representative Soumaya Mhadeb emphasized that, "Moroccan women enjoy some leadership positions in trade unions, but this was only accomplished through many years of efforts to address women's working conditions through research, education and substantial media outreach to organise women."

Forum participants were keen to hear how anti-discrimination legislation in Sweden combined with collective agreement clauses has made the enforcement of laws more effective in that country. "The union and employer must work together to address situations of harassment and discrimination in the workplace."

The union is key to this process,” said Karin Brunzell, international secretary for Sweden’s ST -The Union of Civil Servants in her presentation.

“Things do change, but it is an ongoing struggle to protect our rights as women. Just fifty years ago in Sweden, a man accused of rape could defend himself by saying that the woman provoked it through her dress or behaviour “that wouldn’t happen today.”

Kristina Olsson, international secretary of the Swedish municipal workers’ union Kommunal, told how her trade union counted only men as members a century ago, but today women are 80% of the membership. Kommunal promotes gender equality and diversity through wide-ranging measures.

At the end of two full days of discussion and presentations, participants set a shortlist of action priorities for the region. These include: building the capacity of women to engage as union members and leaders, demanding laws are enforced to ensure women’s rights and protection from violence and discrimination, addressing the impact of precarious work on women, and continuing to communicate and grow the support network for MENA women trade unionists, including through social media connections.



Mirna Mneimneh, of Lebanon’s trade union for tobacco and tobac workers, concluded that the knowledge and contacts she has gained from this PSI women’s leadership forum and previous communications training strengthen her ability to network and communicate, and to support her co-workers and family as a stronger union activist.

For event photos, please see [Facebook](#)