

# TUNISIAN WOMEN AT WORK AND IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

Dorra MAHFOUDH - DRAOUI

For Tunisian women, accessing the public space went hand in hand with their involvement in the social struggles. As a first step, they joined humanitarian associations and took part in the liberation and decolonization movement. During the 70s and the 80s, their mobilization and prominence became more significant as they gained access to the labour market and started to work in different economic sectors. Throughout their history, Tunisian women have constantly participated in the trade union battles so as to defend the social rights of all the citizens and to achieve gender equality.

Nowadays, half of the unionists are women, and in spite of the various impediments and stereotypes, women are very active in grassroots trade unions. Never the less, they are still underrepresented in the decision making bodies, and therefore unable to have a direct influence on the national policies. The recent years' social and political dynamics have proven that the actors of the labour movement have a major role to play.

We hope that this study will contribute to the improvement of the status of women, not only in theory, but also through the deep conviction of both men and women that labour and political democracy can solely be achieved through parity, the inclusion of women, and internal and external equality in the labour organization and the world of work.

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Tunis-December 2018



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*The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and its trade union project team in Tunisia would like to thank all the institutions and the persons who contributed to the creation of this work.*

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I would like to express all my gratitude to a considerable number of persons whose precious help and assistance were essential in the creation of this work.

”

*First, I would like to thank the union activists of both genders who readily assented to speak with a lot of sincerity, clear sightedness, and passion so as to share with us a life time experience dedicated to the fight for democracy and social rights. Thanks to the union leaders for their exceptional support and the time they devoted on the eve of the 23rd congress in spite of their over loaded agenda. My gratitude goes to Mr Nouredine Taboubi, Mr Samir Cheffi, Mr Mohamed Msalmi, Mr Anouar Ben Gueddour, as well as Mr Mohamed Chakroun. This militant, who had served some time in prison, invited us to his house where, in the presence of his wife, paid tribute to her support and offered us a historical photograph illustrated testimony; he has my undying gratitude.*

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*Tourkia Ben Kheder, Hayet Trabelsi, Habiba Mizouni, Awatef Grich, Leila Dami, Thouraya Essayem, Ilhem Sahli, Nejma Aouadi. This book is a homage to the commitment and the resistance in the struggle for gender equality among activists and trade unionists from the UGTT*

*I cannot fail to express my gratitude to two other persons: Mr Ali Mahjoubi, a colleague, a friend, and a historian who authored several books on the national movement and the trade union movement from which I learned a great deal about Tahar Haddad's life and achievements. I also salute my friend Dorra Bouzid, a renowned militant feminist in the media field and the founder of a large number of newspapers, who accepted to speak about her mother, Mrs Cherifa Messadi, the first woman trade union activist, and shared with us a number of family records and old photographs.*

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# I. INTRODUCTION

The labour movement in Tunisia has long since been a stage for democratic struggles and social demands. Over the course of fifty years, the country was governed by a single party, and the trade unions were confronted with a significant number of political, economic, and cultural challenges, such as major restrictions on democracy and liberties, an employment crisis further aggravated by the choice to integrate the globalized economy, regional inequalities, and a rise of conservatism and opposition to inclusive and egalitarian values

The UGTT has always housed union activists belonging to different political ideologies. Since the 80s, it has manifested itself as a space in which women's rights and equality defenders who could not organize in an association were able to mobilize and take action, especially through the creation of a women commission.

The 2011 social movement clearly instantiated the fighting potential of grassroots activists from both genders and confirmed their ability to expand popular demands. Over the course of the past few years, the role of the UGTT as a regulator and moderator between the political and social forces has become increasingly manifest. This was clearly revealed through several occasions, such as the bloodshed that took place in Silyana in November 2012, and the general strike that was staged in the wake of the assassination of the national leader, Chokri Belaid, on the 6th of February 2013. In the same year, the failure of the elected representatives of the Constituent Assembly to draft the Constitution and organize the elections in due time resulted in a crisis which led to calling their legitimacy into question. The long Bardo sit-in




brought together a large number of trade unionists, civil society actors, democratic members of parliament and a multitude of citizens. A strong mobilization composed of a massive number of women contributed to the decision to change the prime minister and to the creation of a new government.

The socio-political role of the labour organization in arbitrating and managing conflicts between the various actors increased its legitimacy and earned it, with the dialogue quartet, the Nobel Prize in 2015.

The role of women, female activists and their mobilizations, both inside and outside trade unions, is now acknowledged and admired. Yet, women were already involved in social struggles well before the country's independence. This is clearly revealed through the journey of historical activists such as Cherifa Massadi, the first female union leader. One should also point out that in 1978, in 1984 and 2008, during the events that rocked the mining area, women trade unionists were at the forefront of the dispute. They took part in strikes, sit-ins, marches, demonstrations, etc.). During the transition years (2011 to 2014), they were present in public places and in the decision-making bodies to participate in the common struggles and also to include women's rights in the socio-political agendas and in the legal reforms.

After a struggle that lasted for months, the fight led by women to insert their goals into the revolutionary process gave birth to a new Constitution that incorporates the principle of equality between women and men. Several articles of the Tunisian Constitution of January 2014 (including article 46) stipulate that "The State guarantees equal opportunities for men and women to assume different responsibilities in all sectors. The State works to achieve parity between men and women in elected councils; It rests with the state to take measures to eradicate violence against women".

However, over the past six years, the rise of a conservative ideology



has fuelled gender-based discriminations, trivialized women's unemployment, and threatened their gains and independence. The calls for housewives to return to their houses so as to "leave work to men" or to "preserve the families", show that women's struggle for revolution does not necessarily lead to a change in social representations and power relations between sexes.

More specifically, one can ask a question about the extent to which women's presence and participation in social struggles succeeded in changing gender relations in the unions, in improving their ability to access decision-making positions, and responsibilities, and in establishing equality in the organization's structures and agenda.

## ISSUES

Most of the researches conducted on women in social movements show that "social relations between the sexes permeate this kind of movements in depth, and that this consideration must always be taken into account when they are analyzed"<sup>1</sup>. Will the participation of women in union and revolutionary social struggles succeed in making women's rights recognized and in reducing patriarchal dominance, and has their involvement led to a better position in decision-making structures and offered an access to union responsibilities? To what extent are the gender equality issues, which keep as yet to be referred to women's commissions, placed across the board in all the demands and programs of the union organization.

Since unionists are major actors of social change who are constantly willing to fight all forms of discrimination and inequality in the world of labour and society, we can expect them to also

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<sup>1</sup> Danielle Kargoat cited by Dina Beblawi « L'invisibilisation du féminisme dans la lutte révolutionnaire de la gauche radicale égyptienne », in *Féminismes dans les pays arabes*, Nouvelles Questions Féministe-Vol.35, N°2/2016

take it upon themselves to bring about a change inside the organization and implement measures to anchor equality in its bodies.

To verify this hypothesis we will have to go through a two-level analysis.

First, by examining the situation of women in the world of labour on the one hand because the unionization of women is determined by their professional situation, and on the other hand to assess inequalities of opportunity and progress made on the path of parity. We will have to examine the role of the labour organization in reducing gender inequalities in terms of employment. Over the past few years, the focus has mainly been placed on the common objectives. However, one might ask if labour organization's priorities include advocating specific objectives for women, such as the equal access to employment and training, equal salaries, reconciliation measures between professional and family life, early childhood services, and the equal representation in positions of responsibility?

At a second level, we will examine the integration of equality in the organization itself by putting it to the test of "gender". In the context of the current reconstitutions and reforms, the question is to what extent have the labour organization and its bodies tried to meet the expectations of women and wage earners through a clear commitment to establishing equality and fighting patriarchal practices aiming at excluding women activists both in a direct and indirect way?

## /// OBJECTIVES AND APPROACH

This study aims to take stock of the situation of women, their place and their contribution to the trade union movement in Tunisia. This study is expected to add up to the constitution of a knowledge base on the role of women workers and trade unionists in Tunisia,

and the obstacles they encountered. This diagnosis could result in proposals and recommendations to strengthen Gender mainstreaming<sup>2</sup> at all levels of the labour organization and to imbed the principles of equality and parity of the Constitution into union attitudes and structures, which would make them gain in efficiency and credibility.

The fact of being both a university sociologist interested in studying the various forms of gender inequality in our society and a former trade union leader and founder of a specialized structure, the Women's Trade Union Commission, allowed me to delve once more into this micro society that represents the labour movement and to clarify my knowledge of the path on which I decided to venture. The proximity and the network of relations were an advantageous opportunity for our observation, which was naturally committed to a better knowledge of the situation of women in the world of work and unionism.



*The presentation of the National Survey on "Women in Union Action: "activism and responsibility", in the presence of Mr. AbidBriki, Secretary General Deputy, in charge of the Trade Union Training Department (1998)*

<sup>2</sup> Gender mainstreaming is an integrated approach of the gender perspective based on a strategy that aims at reinforcing equality between men and women in society, civil society organizations, and public policies, transversally encompassing all the domains ( education, employment, culture, participation in politics and decision making.).



However, it is worth noting that this endeavour was not devoid of risks when it came to defending a critical and objective point of view.


The experience In these two spheres gave rise to studies and publications that we conducted or coordinated during the 80s, 90s and 2000s. First of all, the publication of a first article on "The unionization of women in Tunisia" (1988)<sup>3</sup> which goes over a double experience. A collective one related to the First Women's Commission created in 1983 which we coordinated and a personal experience focusing on the first woman Deputy Secretary General of the National Union of Higher Education and Scientific Research (1980-1984). A few years later, in 1998, we had to conduct a survey among 800 trade unionists, at the behest of the National Commission of Working Women and the UGTT's Trade Union Education and Workers' Training department. The theme was "Tunisian women between work and union life" (Comparative approach by gender)<sup>4</sup>. In 2006, we conducted a study on the UGTT's union renewal with two quantitative and qualitative surveys (see Reference at the end of the document).

We assume that the place and role of women in the movement and militancy interact with their professional situation. They are also imbued with patriarchal logic and gender inequalities in the private and domestic sphere as well as in the public and socio-political sphere. Our approach will therefore be to analyze the place and role of women as well as the social relations between men and women on four levels:

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<sup>3</sup> Articles published in the magazine : Article publié dans la Revue Peuples méditerranéens, Les femmes et la modernité, n°44-45 Juil.-Déc.1988

<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted among 800 unionists and militants of both genders ( of whom 2 out of 3 are women ). The study has not been published. It was introduced on the occasion of an international seminar on women in the trade union action: L'enquête a été menée auprès de 800 militants et syndicalistes des deux sexes (dont 2/3 femmes). L'étude est non publiée, elle a été présentée lors d'un séminaire international sur « Les femmes dans l'action syndicale : activisme et responsabilité », Tunis, 22-23 juillet 1998.

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- The place of women in the world of work
  - The Tunisian society's representations of women's work
  - The social and political role of women
  - The labour movement and the integration of women and equality into the organizational culture and operations

## ELEMENTS OF METHODOLOGY

**Our methodology is generally based on a critical analysis of the publications produced on the subject, on national statistics and on scientific surveys.**

*Studies of women (or gender) and the labour movement are quite recent. Historians and sociologists<sup>5</sup> have approached the trade union movement in a general way and without taking the question of gender into account. Whether at university<sup>6</sup> or on the field, the issue of mainstreaming equality and power relations in the trade union movement has only been approached indirectly through addressing matters such as the relationship of women at work, women in public and political life, or the impact of legal reforms on women's rights.*

**This sociological study is based on:**

- ◀ An analysis of the national statistics
- ◀ A critical analysis of the rare academic researches of historians, sociologists, philosophers, etc. On the question
- ◀ A collection and study of the available material in the trade union sphere: studies, internal bulletins,

*legal texts, congress reports, minutes of meetings, training session summaries, press articles including the Ah-Chaab newspaper, various statements made on the occasion of the 8th of March, the 1st of May, the 25th of November the day of the fight against violence, the 5th of December, the day of the assassination of the trade union leader, Farhat Hached, etc.*

◀ Conducting in-depth interviews with women activists to understand their union career (motivations for affiliation, activism, access to responsibility, opportunities and obstacles encountered, strategies to assert themselves). We interviewed about fifteen acknowledged activists (arrested and / or sanctioned for their trade union activities), some are "women belonging to the government", others are opposition militants, often union leaders, sometimes grassroots unionists. We did not have the opportunity to speak of other "invisible" activists,

<sup>5</sup> The works cited are particularly those of the historian Ali Mahjoubi and the sociologist Salah Hamzaoui.

<sup>6</sup> None of the 80 dissertations in the Tunisian university deals directly with women's union activism. See the publication : Sur 80 titres de mémoires et thèses à l'université tunisienne aucun ne traite directement du syndicalisme des femmes voir la publication « Femmes et genre, Bibliographie

such as the spouses or widows of trade unionists who played an important role by assisting union leaders and organizing the struggle in difficult moments. We hope that they will be the subject of a future research.

◀ We also conducted some interviews among male unionists (7 of whom 4 holding positions in the Executive Office of the UGTT). Many of the Secretaries General or the Under Secretaries General have family members, such as their spouses, fathers, brothers or sisters who militated or are still militating in a union. This was ostensibly an advantage, but it was also experienced as a means of control or even as an impediment to their commitment).

◀ A participant observation of the five public events organized during the last months (November 2016 to January 2017) during the campaign for raising the awareness of women's union leadership<sup>7</sup>, honouring the first activists and highlighting the struggles. The campaign also aimed to advocate women's access to the next UGTT congress scheduled for the end of January 2017.

◀ A critical analysis of an experience of union activist<sup>8</sup>, feminist and researcher who is interested in the cause of women and social movements.

◀ Interviews and testimonies of family members of activists. Among them we can cite the one with Dorra Bouzid, the daughter of Chérifa Mesadi (who is in her turn a pioneering journalist and feminist activist). Also, we mention the interview conducted with a woman union activist whose father, Khéreddine Sakli, was a former militant and member of the National Executive Board.

◀ A collection of information from the public hearings of the Truth and Dignity body (IVD) and in particular the session which took place on January 26, 2017. This session was devoted to the testimonies delivered by the victims of the abuses that took place during and after the confrontation between the UGTT and the government, which is better known as the famous "black Thursday" of January 26, 1978.

<sup>7</sup> Several days are organized by women activists in the Said Gagui conference room belonging to the UGTT to raise awareness of the question of equality. The first was held in November under the title "let's not forget" and was meant to pay tribute to the women union militants of the 70s and later decades as well as a number of activists' wives and widows. On the 24th of November 2016, a seminar was held on political violence, and a homage was paid to a number of missing militants like Med Kennou. On the 7th of December, a seminar is organized on "The Tunisian Modernist Thought and the Emergence of the National Union Movement". Among the displayed slogans, one can cite the following: "Equality of opportunities is a constitutional right", "Being a woman trade unionist means being competent and being a leader", "Partners in the fight, partners in decision making", "For a fair representation in the structures of the UGTT". analytique des thèses et mémoire à l'Université tunisiennes. AFTURD/F.F.Ebert, Tunis, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Coordinator of the first women's commission and S.G.A. of S.N.E.S.R.S.R.S.R. From 1980 to 1985, unionist and feminist who conducted several investigations and trainings in the union sector during the 90s and 2000s.



## II. WOMEN'S PLACE IN THE LABOUR MARKET

### 1. Gender Equality in the Labour Market: an Aspiration rather than a Reality

The place and role of women in the trade unions are closely related to their professional situation and to the economic agenda of the country. They also depend on several factors. Among the most important are the educational and competence levels acquired by women, the legislative achievements, the role of employers and companies in respecting social rights including the right to organize, the social attitudes and representations concerning gender roles and women's professional and trade union activities.



*School girls march- Bab Jedid School*

Significant improvements have been observed in raising training level and women's success rates in schools and universities. Today, girls represent two thirds of the students and graduates of Tunisian universities. In rural areas, women's progress in education is less impressive, but more than three quarters have the minimum level. This is attested by a survey conducted in 2013 in the remotest rural areas: 36.7% of women have a primary education level, 31.9% have a secondary level and 6.1% have a higher education level. The rest are either illiterate or have acquired the bare minimum essentials in literacy classes<sup>9</sup>.

The legislative achievements brought about by the new constitution of 2014 tend towards the consolidation of gender equality in various areas. Article 20 states that "All citizens have the same rights and the same duties. They are equal before the law without any discrimination." In Article 34, the Constitution holds the State responsible for the fair representation of women in elected assemblies. Article 40 affirms that "Every citizen has the right to work in decent conditions and at a fair wage". Article 46 is devoted more specifically to women's rights and includes in the Constitution the safeguarding of their achievements as well as the principle of gender parity and the fight against all forms of violence against women.

Yet, the place that women occupy in the labor world, especially in the wage-earning sector, shows that they still face difficulties and discrimination in the pursuit of their economic and social rights. They are the most exposed to unemployment, underemployment, disqualification and abusive dismissals. Even when they have stable jobs, they do not have the same opportunities for promotion and the same benefits as their male counterparts.

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<sup>9</sup> « Recherche sur la situation des femmes en milieu rural tunisien et leur accès aux services publics, dans 11 gouvernorats de la Tunisie ». Publication MAFF/AECID, Tunis 2013, Coord. Dorra Mahfoudh-Draoui



Employment opportunities cannot keep up with the growing number of women who are young, educated and tend to postpone marriage more and more (in 2014, the average age at first marriage is 28.03 years for women against 33, 7 years for men and, after 30 years, 28.4% of women are single against 53.5% of men). In comparison with the first generations of working women, young women cling to their work after childbearing either to preserve their autonomy or to contribute to or totally take charge of the family budget. But the constraints of the family and the economic system cause them to leave the labor market. Hence, in 2014, the participation rate for women is 28.5%. It reaches its zenith with 50.7% in the 25-29 years category. But it drops rapidly and is only 37.1% between 40-44 years and 30.3% between 45 and 49 years. For men of the same age, it is respectively 90.7% and 89.4%.

Since the 1990s, we have witnessed the development of precarious forms of employment: reduction of permanent contracts and increase of fixed-term contracts which, while trying to meet the increased demand for employment, have been accompanied by more frequent dismissals and serious encroachments on social rights.

For job-hunting young women, flexibility has led to the proliferation of precarious, atypical, unstable, low-paid and often uninsured jobs.<sup>10</sup> Young people are often entitled only to jobs in the informal economy, fixed-term contracts, without social security cover and without a contract. In 2012<sup>11</sup>, of the 914,300 young people aged 19-29 who work, 42.8% do not have a work contract. This proportion is 51.6% among men and 22.4% among women. The latter are often more than men on fixed-term contracts (respectively 36.7%

<sup>10</sup> In a previous study we analyzed the condition of women workers and particularly that of the textile and clothing sector. See Dorra Mahfoudh Draoui « Crise du chômage, crise d'identité : le cas des ouvrières du textile en Tunisie » in Genre et politiques néolibérales. Actes du colloque international organisé par AFARD/DAWN/FEMNET (2006)

<sup>11</sup> According to the 2012 National Survey of Population and Employment, INS

and 16.2%). The study conducted by the UGTT on "Tunisian women in the informal economy"<sup>12</sup>, estimates the number of these workers at 306,000 out of a total of 1,156,000 workers of both sexes. This is about one in three active women in this case (32.5%). Among the significant findings, we note that 59% of women workers in the informal economy are paid less than 300 TDs a month and only 11.7% receive a health care card.

This situation in the labor market has led workers in many sectors out of unionization, which union activists, both men and women, consider as a serious threat to the right to organize.

According to the study conducted by the UGTT's executives<sup>13</sup>, women trade unionists are more worried than men in the face of these circumstances (respectively 74%, 5% and 71.5%). This is not surprising given the fact that unemployment resulting from dismissal (especially collective dismissal by random shutdown of companies) affects the most fragile economic sectors, the most dependent on the international situation, especially the textile and clothing sector where three quarters of the workers are women (76%). The crisis in this sector, a sector which has not been able to restructure itself to cope with competitiveness and achieve the necessary upgrading, has resulted in the shutdown of around 600 companies and the unemployment of 35 000 workers over the last five years. According to the Ministry of Employment<sup>14</sup>,

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<sup>12</sup> « La femme tunisienne dans l'économie informelle. Réalités et solutions possibles du point de vue syndical ». Department of women, young workers and associations. A study that includes 609 femmes, realized by Karim Trabelsi. UGTT/Solidarity Center, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> In the form of two published quantitative and qualitative surveys, , 1) « Vers un renouveau syndical. Diagnostic quantitatif de l'UGTT par ses cadres », Published by the Departement of Studies and Documentation, UGTT/F/F/Ebert. November 2006 (145 pages in Arabic and French) and 2) « Regards sur la réalité de l'UGTT à travers les textes et les témoignages vivants ». Published by the Department of Studies and Documentation, UGTT/F.F.Ebert, November 2006 (270 pages in Arabic)

<sup>14</sup> Report on the situation of workers dismissed for economic reasons in 2003 (published in 2004)



dismissed workers in the textile and clothing sector represent almost half of the lay-offs in 2003 (47%). The overwhelming majority of them (84%) is not checked by the Dismissal Control Commission (CCL)<sup>15</sup> and is therefore not protected by the Labor Code.<sup>16</sup>

After 2011, the situation in this regard has not improved. According to the report Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (May 2013) on the rights of women textile workers, the violations seem to have multiplied, ignoring social legislation and the Labor Code. In Monastir alone and following the shutdown of 87 factories between 2007 and 2012, no less than 5,000 workers became unemployed, the majority without any compensation.

## 2. Women's Access to Employment: a Threatened Right

In 2011, of the 1,026,700 working women, only 745,700 had a job, which means an unemployment rate of 27.4% (against 15% for men)<sup>17</sup>. It is even more important in disadvantaged regions of the country.

Judging by female activity rates, which have changed only slightly over the last two decades, from 23% in 1994 to 24.9% in 2011, and 28.5% in 2014 against the male rates of 73.8%, 70.1% and 64.5% at the same dates, women's unemployment is not a new phenomenon. After the 2011 revolution, the situation has not changed<sup>18</sup> much and the deterioration of the employment market particularly affects women who face more than men, and even more than before, the process of selection when they try to integrate the labor market. Thus, between 2008 and 2015, women

<sup>15</sup> See the «Tunisian labour code»

<sup>16</sup> For more details see « Le secteur du textile et habillement en Tunisie et la réinsertion des travailleurs », Publication UGTT, Department of Studies and Documentation/BIT, 2005

<sup>17</sup> The National Survey of Population and Employment (3rd quarter 2013), INS. The unemployment rate of the population is 15.7 with notable differences between the sexes: 22.5% for women and 13.1% for men.

<sup>18</sup> INS and National Observatory of Employment and Qualifications

unemployment rate rose from 18.6% to 22.7% and the male rate rose from 12.6% to 12.4%.<sup>19</sup>

For higher education graduates, the chances are even lower and the waiting periods longer (the national unemployment rate for women with tertiary education is 43.8% compared with 23.7% for men).<sup>20</sup>

Recent data on the transition period show that the employment crisis is particularly affecting women. Many women workers are dismissed following the shutdown of the companies, not to mention the number of graduates who are about 34,000 additional young women who solicit the labor market every year (27,000 are looking for a first job)

In 2016, the study conducted by the UGTT on women in the informal economy, and which is cited above, also shows that the risks of women unemployment are closely linked to regional disparities. For example, the female unemployment rate is 42.7% in Gafsa, 38.7% in Jendouba and 37.6% in Kasserine.

Thus, while it is true that the exclusion in working life concerns both sexes, it is also true that women, and particularly the young among them, are the first victims. Studies conducted among persons under 30 (including the ETVA 2013<sup>21</sup>) confirm this observation: "About 18% of young people aged 15 to 29 are inactive and out of school (they do not pursue education or training, do not work and are not looking for work). The same survey states that the phenomenon particularly concerns young women, 30% of whom are inactive, compared to only 6% of men.

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<sup>19</sup>Source: INS data collected and formatted by CREDIF in « Femmes et hommes en Tunisie, indicateurs et chiffres. Publication CREDIF 2016 (in Arabic).

<sup>20</sup>According to the same NSI source: in 2013, the unemployment rate of women graduates is 43.6%, that of men 22.1%. A slight improvement is recorded in 2015 (respectively 39.9% and 20.7%), but gender gaps remain significant.

<sup>21</sup>Source: a study on « Transition vers le marché du travail des jeunes femmes et hommes en Tunisie. » National Observatory of Employment and Qualifications (June 2014)

In a society that does not acknowledge the right to work for women as it does for men, many women choose to forfeit, anticipating their poor chances of integration into professional life and consequently into public life. The prolonged period of unemployment produces psychological effects like discouragement, loss of self-confidence, difficulties in building life projects, forced celibacy and identity crisis. It also leads to socio-economic troubles like obsolescence of skills, poverty, migration<sup>22</sup>, etc. and can even trigger political problems such as social instability, disputes, delinquency, etc.

As a result, we deduce that women are not protected against discrimination in work opportunities and economic autonomy. But what about women who do have a job?

According to the economic sectors, employed women are more or less slowed down in their promotion, have access to decision-making or functional positions much later in their careers than men who have the same rank, and are subject to various forms of violence and sexual harassment. The most vulnerable are often precarious workers, the poor, single mothers, rural women and home-based workers. We also find in this situation those who are in contact with the public (service providers in the field of health, education, etc.), those who suffer from a disability, as well as young graduates who have precarious jobs. All these examples show that even when women come out of isolation and enter the labor market, this is not enough to reduce the domination to which they are subjected whether this domination is material and linked to economic processes and the organization of work or ideological and related to the patriarchal system.

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<sup>22</sup> In a previous work, we have shown that migration in Tunisia is more and more female with migration of single women taking place more often. See Dorra Mahfoudh Draoui « La migration féminine entre projet personnel et stratégie familiale » (2010) and Dorra Mahfoudh Draoui and all. « Les paroles de la migration entre la Tunisie, l'Italie et l'Europe. Extraits de récits de vie » Edition AFTURD/IMED/TECLA (2010)

Moreover, despite certain guarantees, since Tunisia ratified in 1968 the Equal Pay Convention 100, the 1977 Framework Convention, the 1993 Act and Article 5bis of the Labor Code, the wage inequalities between women and men are still there. In agriculture, for the same day of work, a woman receives half the salary of a man. This means that she provides a free half-day of work. In the private sector, women earn 20% to 30% less than men. After 2011, the gender gap has increased: it is 40.4% in 2012 compared to 32.7% in 2007.<sup>23</sup>

In the face of these discriminations, there is almost no control and the penalty is ridiculous (24 to 60 DT) and not enforced. One of the consequences is that the recognition and qualification of the worker, and consequently her declassification in the organization chart of the company, is left to the free decision of the employer. It is this arbitrary situation which, by worsening, pushes women workers to organize themselves in women's collectives or in the union sections to defend their demands.<sup>24</sup>

### 3. The Public Policies and Inciting Women to Leave the Labour Market

In addition to the flexibility measures that increase the precariousness of employment, employment policy is characterized by a whole series of arrangements between the state, the family and the labor market or companies. Thus, part-time work is proposed as a measure for "work-home balance". The Law of 28 July 2006 offers half-time work for two-thirds of the salary to working mothers with a child under 16 (3 years renewable twice). The legal text was implemented in January 2007.

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<sup>23</sup> Source: INS data cited by "Women and men in Tunisia. Indicators and numbers. CREDIF op.cit. Page 168.

<sup>24</sup> What the trade unionists and activists revealed to us in the interviews that we conducted and which are presented later in this text.

It follows other provisions such as that of the Civil Service Code which grants women a layoff of 2 years renewable to raise one or more children who have less than 6 years old or have a disability. In the same spirit, early retirement is offered to active women who reach the age of 50 after at least 15 years of service and who have 3 children under 20 years of age.

Experience has proven that which was intended as a quick fix to ease the burden of working mothers, is becoming a context of unemployment and underemployment, a way of sharing work between women. Like other forms of non-standard work, part-time work is primarily aimed at introducing work flexibility that benefits firms while increasing the precariousness of women's jobs and challenging gender equality in the labor market.

Many studies carried out in other countries show that part-time work is imposed on women by companies or by family constraints and social representations. For example, in a survey of Tunisian citizens, the vast majority (9 out of 10) said that part-time work is more suitable for women. Since we also know that the majority of domestic work is done by women and that men provide only limited assistance, "social logic" demands that women be assigned part-time work to be able to reconcile work and home.

Beyond the objective of reconciling work and family life, Tunisian legislation "pushes" women with family responsibilities to temporarily or permanently interrupt their professional life by offering them "incentives" at the cost of a loss of important acquisitions and rights.

If the public interventions in the field of the reconciliation between family and professional life seem contradictory with the rights of women, it is because they are the result of a tension, in the public policies, between two opposed reference frames: The emancipation reference of the femmestel which is promoted by



the state feminism which wants to institute the equality between the sexes in all the fields and a second reference that is "familialist" and traditional. Society wants to free women from the constraints of family life (which implies implementing a policy of equalizing the conditions between the two sexes), and at the same time weighing on them the domestic roles and the constraints of family and kinship.<sup>25</sup>

The public policy measures adopted so far do not in any way disturb the established order and division of gender roles. They are, in fact, one of the "solutions" meant to solve the problem of female unemployment, which is done on the basis of women's social rights and their professional aspirations. That is why, as we will see later, this question has been one of the priorities of the women's struggles in the unions since the 1980s.

#### **4. Professional Segregation: the Heavy Impact of the Gender Stereotypes and the Traditional Division of Labour**

In Tunisia, feminization has affected all occupations, some of which have reached parity between the two sexes. These are mainly low-skilled and traditionally female professions (secretary, nurse, textile worker, etc.) but also to a certain extent, middle management employees such as those in education and the liberal professions. Women represent 33% of judges (2012), 28% of engineers (2013), 42.5% of lawyers, 48.2% of higher education teachers but 16.4% of professors and lecturers (Statistics of the Ministry of Education Higher Education, year 2014-2015).

According to the College of Physicians, 36% of pharmacists and 26% of doctors are women (2015). But in the latter case, as elsewhere, inequality has shifted from access to education to the

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<sup>25</sup> This is the thesis developed by Jacques Commaille in several of his works including his article on « Les injonctions contradictoires des politiques publiques à l'égard des femmes » in *Masculin-féminin : questions pour les sciences de l'homme*, PUF, 2001, p. 139

sector (a quasi parity in the public but twice as many men as women in the private sector) or to specialties where women represent one-third of medical specialists and are particularly small in the most prestigious.

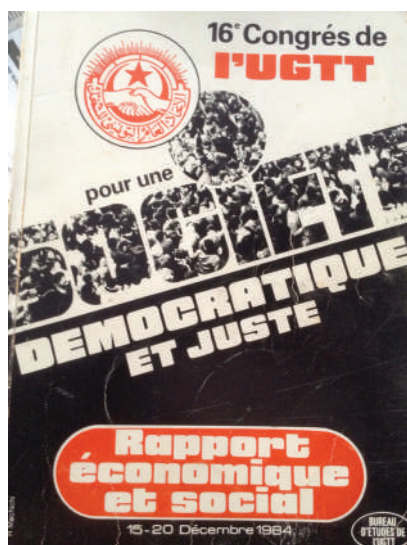
Referring to social representations, can women do all the trades? As far as training is concerned, there are no obstacles for girls to hold occupations considered for a long time as the preserve of men. But in the popular imagination, sometimes even in the minds of guidance counselors or planners, some professions are considered "unsuitable for women". These are, first of all, occupations requiring physical strength, those in the public space, exposing women to others and incivilities, those who call for command, or who require mobility, those finally seemingly incompatible with women's family responsibilities such as night work. The declared criteria leave no choice for women, except the professions of education, health, communication that are perceived as an extension of their family tasks and where competition is tough. This social construction of the feminine and masculine is belied by reality since women have invested a wide range of professions, when political will or economic constraints have prevailed over sexist stereotypes.

In addition to the division of labor and professional stereotypes that limit women's access to certain professions, other barriers impede women's rights in the world of work. While feminization is progressing in some professional sectors, it is far from parity at decision-making levels. Occupational segregation and gender difference are maintained in access to positions of responsibility ("glass ceiling"). Women account for three-quarters of workers (74%) and half of office workers (49.7%). They are mainly used in agriculture, manufacturing and services, which are highly dependent on the economic situation and the hazards of nature. On the other hand, they represent only 17.4% of managers (and only 6.3% of general managers), 10.8% of managers and senior managers and only 9% of senior officers and liberal professions.

The civil service counts 577,692 employees in 2014. Women represent 37.4% of the total, however, only 2.3% of them have reached a decision-making position at the top of the professional hierarchy.

Competent as she is, a woman takes twice as long as a man to attain the same position. The current social context, marked by competition and by the risk of women's exclusion from working life only compounds the trouble. The higher the career ladder goes, the lower women's number becomes. This process is likely to increase if nothing is done to ensure equal skill based opportunities and take women's needs and constraints into account so as to enable them to simultaneously handle several family, professional, associative, union or political responsibilities. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the only way to access high offices is to be appointed by senior officials who rather tend to designate men. This is the result of our interviews and previous studies conducted with the engineers<sup>26</sup> in particular.

*Report of the 16th congress of the UGTT in 1984. A chapter is devoted to "Women and work", elaborated by the members of the union-women's commission*



<sup>26</sup> Les femmes ingénieures en Tunisie : Représentations, rôles et contribution à la vie économique. Ouvrage collectif, RiadhZghal (Coord .) CREDIF, 2006.

# III. SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD WORKING WOMEN

The place of women in the world of work and in the labor movement hinges on the social attitudes and representations of women's work and the division of female and male social roles. How does society see the roles of women and men and how much importance does it place on women's work?

It is worth reminding that over the last few years, the job market in Tunisia has witnessed a significant pressure stemming from the growing numbers of increasingly educated and competent young women. In times of economic crisis and unemployment, these women are easily susceptible of being regarded as men's competitors. The economic independence and the power with which work endows women erode gender differences and can be viewed as a threat by men. Moreover, women's work and economic contribution is a necessity for women, the families, and the country's economy. This paradoxical situation would explain why the issue of women's work is one of the most divisive among Tunisians.

## 1. Working Women Perceived by Society: a Conditional Right

In our studies on the issue of women's work and adherence<sup>27</sup> to

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<sup>27</sup> Enquête sur l'adhésion des Tunisiens aux valeurs égalitaires. Publication CME/AFTURD/UGTT. 2008

the values of equality, we were faced with contradictory and divergent attitudes from both sexes. Whereas men think that women are privileged, women feel that they are the object of discrimination.

In an opinion poll, Tunisians were asked to comment on the work of women<sup>28</sup> from different points of view. They had to say whether they regarded it as a right, a constraint, a condition of personal autonomy, or a contribution to family income. They had to express the level of their agreement on various options:

" Women should only work when the man's salary is insufficient for family expenses " seems to be the opinion endorsed by the majority since 53% completely agree on it. In the same vein, women at the head of households are entitled to work according to 45% of women and men according to the same survey. In fact, attitudes are favorable when women's work is a necessity. In other words, when the woman is the sole head of the family. However, when work is presented as a source of economic independence "Women should work only to have money to use for themselves and for their children (to have autonomy)", opinions are more nuanced and 38% do not adhere to this opinion at all.

When work is presented as an equal right for both sexes "The woman, if she wishes, should be able to work outside, even if she does not need her salary to live", only 37% accept it as an absolute right, 43% are hesitant and 20% refuse the work of women when they are not in need. This same survey reveals that women and young people (18-24) are the most supportive of women's rights to work.

This does not prevent a large percentage from having prejudices and misconceptions. For example, women's work is deemed as a cause of unemployment (49% of men and 35% of women). Also,

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<sup>28</sup> Op cit.





when it comes to opportunities to find work, women are believed to be more likely to find a job than men. Men tend to hold with this idea more than women do (59% versus 47%).

Admittedly, women find work more easily. But, it should be borne in mind that this is because "they are less demanding" and "accept lower wages than men", are "easier to be submitted and exploited by employers". The factors that favor the recruitment of men corroborate the same stereotypical perspective : "they are more available", can "travel more easily", "have more capacity / physical strength and especially" do not ask for maternity leave, or hours to 'nurse their babies'!

Thus, even though women have gained some awareness of their economic value and rights, and even if society seemingly tolerates the work of women, collective perceptions freeze them in outdated images and society (recreates) standards that generate and reinforce the difference and the hierarchy separating the sexes.

## **2. Women's Double Identity Between Family and Work: the Gap Separating Representations and Reality**

The conventional division of social roles into women and men is a society construction that affects women's work.

When Tunisians are asked to decide on what they consider to be the roles of men and women and to rank them in order of importance<sup>29</sup>, the strength of conformism and the distance from real evolution become conspicuous. Both sexes agree that women's primary role is the maternal role which consists in "educating children and supervising their schooling" (6 out of 10 Tunisians),. Housework and domestic role come in the following position. Whereas the importance of professional role comes third for women, it ranks first when it comes to determining men's role (to

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<sup>29</sup> Op cit.

work to provide for his family and to play the role of the head of the household - 2/3 place this role in the first position). The two sexes hesitate when it comes to ranking man's educational role. In fact, there are two opinions. Women are more likely than men to demand that men pull their weight in family and educational responsibilities. They are also more likely to demand more participation in decision-making as a legitimate consequence of their economic contribution to the household income.

Thus, in terms of adherence to standards, what seems to predominate is a rather traditional representation of the differences between male and female roles. What is a priority for the man is first of all his productive role. However, for the woman, it is first of all the reproductive role (education, attending to and taking care of the others). But this conformism is starting to be subverted and lose its legitimacy. This is due to the growing number of women in the labor market and public life, especially in associations and unions that have paved the way for the gradual emergence of gender consciousness.

### **3. The Reconciliation Between Family and professional Life : the responsibility of the Workplace and the Trade Unions**

Because it has become a real challenge and a constant concern for working women and men, this issue is constantly present on the agenda of employers and unionists in all parts of the world. Work and family encroach on each other, and some countries have adopted concrete solutions such as parental leave or child-care services. In countries where such measures have been negotiated between unions and the employment community, women have been able to be more active in the labor market and stay there longer.

It should be remembered that, unlike men who are primarily determined by work, wage and career, women are determined both

by their family and professional identity. They have two models of reference. Because they deny and fail to understand it, the employment circles, the decision-makers and the union leaders fault women for their absenteeism, or their lack of involvement in trade union or political action.

In Tunisia, organizing one's time is becoming increasingly difficult especially among working couples who struggle to strike a balance between work, leisure, family life and sometimes an associative, union or political activity. For Tunisian women, the development of women's professional activity has not been backed by the setting up of public services for children and elderly care. Couples and women spending the better part of their day outside can no longer rely on traditional structures (even though many grandmothers are still playing the role of mothers).

If the issue of work-family balance has not so far received the interest it deserves, it is because it is perceived as "a women's affair". In point of fact, almost all domestic tasks are incumbent on women, whereas men are becoming less involved in the organization and management of family life. Surveys on the time budget of Tunisians confirm this inequality in gender roles<sup>30</sup>. On average, Tunisian women work six times longer than men on domestic chores and on taking care of children, the elderly or dependent persons, 5 hours 16 per day, including 2 hours for the preparation of meals. Men spend 39 minutes per day doing the same tasks.

The daily workload is composed of hours of paid and unpaid work (or domestic work). The distribution of social roles between the sexes assigns women a total workload that exceeds that of men by almost 40%<sup>31</sup>. Employed women are those who work the

<sup>30</sup> According to the first national survey conducted on men and women's time budget in Tunisia

<sup>31</sup> No matter if they are schoolgirls, students, employed, unemployed, or retired, women's work load is always larger than that of men.

most. They spend more than 9 hours a day on work. About half of it is remunerated(4:47) and the other half devoted to domestic work (4:18).

The public employees are distinguished from the other workers by a longer domestic work time (4 h 47min on average per day), also a longer transport time (1:39), but a shorter sleep time (7:10 am). Women who work in the private sector are less able to reduce their working hours : they work an average of five and a half hours a day, which is the equivalent of 38,30 hours per week.

Women whose ages are between 35 and 44 years old are considered as "being under pressure" because of the intense activities they tend to undertake at this age. For instance, they lead a professional life, build a career, devote themselves to a family project, and sometimes join an association or a party. Many believe that the mother's work has negative effects on the schooling of children. This idea is one of the reasons that make mothers feel guilty and continue to work after the birth of their children in order to maintain or improve their family's living standards. More and more of them are working despite the scarcity (and the cost) of early childhood care services and kinder gardens. Children are often left in the care of grandparents, which allows mothers to continue to work<sup>32</sup>.

The studies conducted on the negative effects of women's work on family life, allowed us to notice that social issues are contingent on gender stereotypes. Most surprisingly, women themselves reproduce and perpetuate these discriminating prejudices. However, the study conducted on socialization in the Tunisian family<sup>33</sup> shows that mothers who work "compensate" their absence by an intense and attentive presence with their children. They are more

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<sup>32</sup> This is what is revealed by the national survey on the socialization of children in the Tunisian family, already cited.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid by the ministry of women in 2000.



aware than those who do not work, of the opportunities and the risks of the school environment. They appreciate the importance of the diploma and its positive effects on professional success. Their children often have better grades than others.

As for the capacity of women and men to reconcile work and home<sup>34</sup>, the interviews we conducted show that men's discourse is quite different from that of women. Whereas men tend to say that they "get along" with their spouses, the women describe the situation as problematic, a source of conflict and perpetual stress in the couple. Men are more likely than women to report professional constraints, such as a job that requires them to travel frequently, irregular working hours or overtime. What is brought to the fore is their complete availability for their work or for work-related activities, namely union activities. Conciliation is experienced by men as a dispute that is difficult to settle and that is most often in favor of professional life and career.

Women, on the other hand, are often impelled by their responsibilities as mothers and wives to refuse overtime and business trips despite the opportunity to obtain a promotion or a bonus. For the same reasons, they avoid jobs or positions of responsibility that require a professional over-investment (frequent trips, overseas missions, training courses, etc.). The impact of family life on professional life partially explains why women keep losing ground in their professional, union, or political career.

#### **4. Women's Wages: an Indispensable Contribution to the Family Income**

It has become needless to prove that the salary of the Tunisian woman is now an essential contribution to the family income. Whether it is the wife, the daughter, or sometimes even the sister,

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<sup>34</sup> As it is.



who supports her unemployed brother, women continue to pull their weight in the family. We have seen that this contribution gives women a decision-making power in the management of the budget, but is it enough to change the representations towards a greater recognition of the economic contribution of women? How important are women's wages regarded to be by employment environments, family and mentalities? Is it still considered as a supplement?

The recent studies<sup>35</sup> on the Tunisian society reveal that half of the Tunisians still think that women's wages are supplementary salaries. Women are opposed to this view as three-quarters say that a woman's salary is not a supplement but an indispensable contribution. This idea, often debunked by reality, comes from the fact that women earn less than men. It is worth reminding (see section I.2) that in the private sector, women's wages are in deed lower than men's. In agriculture, a woman earns half as much as a man, and in the informal economy 60% of women workers receive on average a monthly salary of 300DT, which is way below the minimum wage.

Whether it is a question of necessity, of choice or whether it is because the law encourages the co-operation of both spouses to the needs of the family<sup>36</sup>, women's contribution approximately amounts to 30% of the family budget. With unemployment and poverty, the salary of the wife or daughter is about the only source of income. Thus, the arguments that are set forth to justify inequalities in wages, underpaying women<sup>37</sup>, compelling them to

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<sup>35</sup> CREDIF, L'argent dans le couple et la gestion du revenu familial, publication du CREDIF, 2010

<sup>36</sup>The article 22, sections (4) and (5), of the Code of Personal Status stipulates that: " the husband is the head of the family. As part of spousal support, he must provide for the needs of the family and children within his capacity and according to their condition. The wife must contribute to the family if she has property »

<sup>37</sup>We remind that, on average, women's wages in the private sector are 20% lower than men's. In agriculture, women earn half as much as men

take part-time jobs or refusing them a promotion on the pretext that they are not as important as men, prove to be groundless. The studies cited above also show that women's money is spent in fungible and invisible expenses (food, clothing, medical and school care, etc.). Nevertheless, men's money is invested in durable and visible goods that ensure security (house, land, car, etc.).

Accordingly, we deduce that women's work has become customary and that active women are now part of our cities' urban backdrop. Almost one out of three Tunisian women works and several professions that were previously monopolized by men have gradually become accessible to women (police officer, registrar, marshal notary, oil platform engineer, pilot, bus driver, etc.). No matter how modest the job may be, it offers women a means of asserting themselves, acquiring a social status, and accessing economic autonomy and public life. If in some cases work does not seem crucial to women's lives (including for women themselves), it is because it is not very rewarding and does not provide them with benefits, recognition, and autonomy. Another reason is that it puts them at odds with social expectations that continue to value their family and domestic role.

In a context of economic crisis and unemployment where the number of educated women is constantly rising, work becomes the real challenge of social relations between sexes.

In spite of its sometimes alienating aspects and the different types of exploitation to which women are subjected, it constitutes a powerful means of emancipation and access to social and economic rights. It is to defend this right that women became involved in the trade union movement in the 1970s and even before, by adhering to and campaigning for the general cause (workers' social and economic rights, democracy and freedoms), but also for their specific cause (equal rights, wages and opportunities for training and recognition of their role and struggles).



*A seminar that was organized to pay tribute to the enlightened thinker and militant unionist, Tahar Haddad. The theme was "Tunisian modernist thought and the emergence of national trade union movement ". Room Saïd Gagui UGTT (from left to right): Ali Mahjoubi, Zeineb Cherni, Dorra Mahfoudh, Raoudha Gharbi, Abdebasset Ben Hassen (7dec.2016)*


## IV. WOMEN AND THE UNION MOVEMENT: MILITATING FOR EQUALITY AND RECOGNITION

Observation shows that women emerge when unionism takes the form of a social movement, but they disappear as soon as unionism becomes an institution with its rules and practices. Why has not the questioning of social class relations, which is a main function of trade unionism, led to questioning of gender relations in Tunisia?

The women's unionization movement has developed from the 1970s as a result of the combined effect of economic and social changes.<sup>38</sup> During this period, the commitment of women textile workers, trade unionists, strikers, feminists and intellectuals of all kinds developed in organized structures and expression and mobilization frameworks such as cultural clubs, the LTDH and especially the UGTT. In 1975, a few years after the law of 72, which had opened the country to international capital and exports, the first textile women worker's strike took place. Most often spontaneous, the strikes brought out the Tunisian women and revealed the existence of a dynamic female proletariat, which provided the unions with its first activists.

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<sup>38</sup> For more details on this period see: Dorra Mahfoudh « La syndicalisation des femmes en Tunisie » in *Les femmes et la modernité, Peuples Méditerranéens*, 44-45, Juil.déc. 1988.



During the 2008 events that shook the mining basin, the 2011 revolution and the transition years, women and trade unionists among them were active in the social struggles and in the strong moments of mobilization throughout all the regions of the country. This dynamic has enabled the trade union movement to broaden its capacity for action on the basis of shared values of equality, social justice and non-discrimination. It has also been able to strengthen solidarity, to increase the sense of belonging to the union UGTT and finally to develop external solidarity with emerging civil society.

Even though the people were the political subject, the "subject of history", the central union and its grassroots activists were the catalyst and continued to be the mediating force in the transition period, reinforcing the weight of civil society and the legitimacy of elected institutions.

Women trade unionists have been as leading actors as the men in the protest against relations of domination and exploitation and in the defense of the principle of parity in electoral lists and of equality in the constitution. One is tempted to believe that this would result in more egalitarian relationships and a turning point in union leadership.

Paradoxically, the more Tunisian women advance and mark their presence as a new actor in the labor and social movement, the less they are recognized as a political force and the more they are ignored, under-represented or under-estimated. A simple reality check shows that women emerge when unionism takes the form of a social movement but they disappear as soon as it becomes an institution with its rules and practices. Trade union institutions do not ratify the advancement of women in trade union action. Even though speeches are about equality, trade union dynamics remains marked by practices and a largely unequal organizational culture that keeps women invisible. Why has not the questioning of social class relations, which is a main function of trade unionism, led to questioning of gender relations in Tunisia?



## 1. The Lessons of History

### a) Tahar Haddad or the link between the Cause of Women<sup>39</sup> and that of Organized Labour

Tahar Haddad had an uncommon and rich life. After studying at Zitouna, he discovered the ideas of great thinkers like Ibn Khaldoun (who associates faith and reason and denounces "destructive" injustice) and reformers such as the Egyptian Kacem Amin, author of two books on the liberation of women.<sup>40</sup> This allowed him to develop a broad knowledge and a critical spirit. Haddad has "drawn the needed arguments to defend the rights of Muslim women and equality". His social and national conscience was formed in contact with struggles for independence and against all forms of oppression and exploitation. He inherited modernist thought that began in the Arab world and particularly in Tunisia. Indeed, historians remind us: Tunisia has been at the forefront in the abolition of slavery and has established equality and freedom of worship in the first constitution of 1861. Haddad's political commitment was materialized in 1920 when he joined the party of Destour.

Witnessing the birth of the Tunisian trade union movement, he teamed up with Mohamed Ali El Hammi for the creation in December 1924 of the first national union: the General Confederation of Tunisian Workers. He wrote in the press to defend the trade union rights of Tunisian workers and documented the beginnings of the trade union struggle in a book entitled "The Tunisian Workers and the Birth of the Trade Union Movement", published in 1927.

<sup>39</sup> Tahar Haddad (1899-1935) wrote many articles and two books for which he is known, one about workers and the other about women. We refer here to the latter, to the scholarly writings of Zeineb-Cherni and Raoudha Gharbi in particular, to a recent book by the historian Ali Mahjoubi on the trade union movement and to the newspaper articles of the time presented by the National Library published in January 2016 under the heading "Excerpts from the press articles published by Tahar Haddad from 1930 to 1940 (in both languages). We also chaired the conference organized by union activists at the UGTT as a tribute to Tahar Haddad's fight for women on December 7, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> In 1899 « La libération de la femme » and in 1900 « La nouvelle femme »

This thinker was interested in the two categories that were most affected by oppression: the workers who were subjected to class oppression and women writhing under the oppression of patriarchy. He is remembered by Tunisian women for his book *Our Women in the Charia and Society* written in 1930. For him a woman is thrice imprisoned: "prisoner of the house, captive of the veil and prisoner of ignorance"<sup>41</sup>. While she has multiple reproductive, domestic and economic roles (in work and home-based crafts and agricultural production), she has no rights, is married under duress and has neither economic autonomy nor has decision power. Haddad demonstrates that Sharia is not at odds with women's rights and equality. He considers that a series of reforms are necessary to give women fundamental rights: the right to pursue studies, the freedom of choice of the spouse, the right to participate in public life. He called for the liberation of the veil



*Tribute paid by women militant trade unionists to Tahar Haddad in El Jelaz cemetery on the 7th of December 2016*

<sup>41</sup> Cited by Ali Mahjoubi.

(which he regarded as a city tradition from which rural women are exempt) to accompany the evolution of society. Haddad's book caused widespread public outcry and denigration, especially by the religious authorities who divested him of the titles of trainee professor and the notary's decree<sup>42</sup>. Many newspapers<sup>43</sup> echoed the controversy between those who attacked Haddad and those who defended him. Among the latter, we note Abdelaziz Laroui declaring in one of his articles that "Against this inquisitorial mentality of la Nadhara, our protests must be stronger than ever, in the name of the freedom of thought that we have put at the top of our program<sup>44</sup>».

Considered as a major voice in the modernist tradition, Tahar Haddad and his ideas have paved the way for progress for women and for society as a whole. They formed the basis of the transformative ideology of the status of women and emancipatory reforms, and in the first place the Personal Status Code (promulgated in 1956). Haddad is also a beacon for women and especially feminists who claim to be part of "Club Tahar Haddad". It is among them that we find the founders of the Women's Commission of UGTT bearing the ban that it is by the work that women become autonomous and take control of their social and political lives.

### **b) Cherifa Messaadi: a Pioneer of Union Activism**

Born in 1908, Cherifa Massadi was among the first Tunisian women to achieve promotion and emancipation through education.<sup>45</sup> She studied and had the patent in Sfax and left her hometown to escape social conservatism. She resumed studies as a young widow with two children. Her academic background, professional

<sup>42</sup> And this in November 1930. Tahar Haddad responds to the sanction saying he did not practice notary because he preferred to engage in social struggle (cited in Nadhara and Haddad, in *Le Monde Littéraire*, November 1930, Year 2, No. 9, p.7, in Arabic)

<sup>43</sup> *Tunisie Socialiste*, *Le Croissant*, etc.

<sup>44</sup> « Comparez et jugez » in the journal *Le Croissant* of 24 octobre 1930.

<sup>45</sup> We remind the reader that the first school for young Muslim girls in the street Pacha was founded in 1900. This school helped train the first generations of educated women like for example Dr. Tawhida Ben Sheikh, first Tunisian woman doctor.

experience and militant commitment illustrate many of the struggles of women in the historical context of the national struggle for independence. Cherifa Messadi was General Secretary of the Trade Union of Technical and Vocational Education from 1947 to 1968 and also a member of the Board of the National Federation of Education.

In 1951, at the 4th Congress of the UGTT, Cherifa Messadi was elected member of the Executive Board, and for three quarters of a century this fact remains unique.<sup>46</sup> She was in the Administrative Commission for 3 years while the leader Farhat Hached was Secretary General. As evidenced by the photographs and period newspapers, she was the only woman in the general assemblies where she did not hesitate to speak and was often the only woman present in May Day parades and public demonstrations. She chaired one of the most difficult congresses of the UGTT. Faced with her courage and ability to lead the debate, Farhat Hached paid tribute to her in his famous sentence "The only man in this congress is a woman! ". Feminist without claiming herself as such, she has made equality a principle of action and a way of life.

She was arrested on December 7, 1952, two days after the assassination of F. Hached. In a first step, the colonial powers used a ruse to remove her by evoking a nervous breakdown and interned for two months at the Kharouba military hospital in Bizerte. But continuing her protest within the walls of the hospital, she was then deported to Kebili where she joined her other comrades of the Administrative Commission including her husband Mahmoud Messadi.

After she died in 1990, her exceptional fight remained invisible, little known and recognized. She was not entitled, as much as others, to the tribute she deserves as a feminine figurehead of

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<sup>46</sup> As we finish this book a woman is elected at the 23 UGTT congress (January 22-26, 2017)



union activism. Nor has she been of interest to researchers, even in the few books on the role of women that have marked the history of Tunisia in the period in which she militated. We quote as an example the book published in French «Mémoire de Femme. Tunisiennes dans la vie publique 1920-1960<sup>47</sup>».



*April 1949 Cherifa Messadi presiding the UGTT's congress)*

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<sup>47</sup> Collective work published by CREDIF coordinated by Habib Kazdaghli on the career of a dozen women who participated in social movements and marked the history of the country during this period. (CREDIF -1993)





*FarhatHached and Cherifa Messadi*



*June 1953 in the premises of the UGTT*



*Expulsion to Kebili, Cherifa Messadi and members of the CA (December 1952)*



*The return from Kebili*

Some trade unionists still remember the exceptional couple (a rare phenomenon at that time) that Sharifa Messadi and her illustrious husband Mahmoud Messadi formed. *"For years we remember her, because she came especially on December 5 of each year on the anniversary of the assassination of Farhat Hached. She came to the UGTT very early, always accompanied by her husband, to take part in the commemoration and to pay homage to the leader with whom she fought"* (Mohamed Chakroun, former member of the BE of UGTT and SG of the UR of Ben Arous and Tunis).

As a national figure and the first woman union leader in the Arab world, Cherifa Messadi remained in the memory of union activists as an exception that confirms the rule. Her position in the trade union hierarchy has been a challenge for generations of women activists who have succeeded her to break through the glass ceiling, to expose every time the discrimination against women in the world, and the forces that prevents them from having access to management positions at the union center: *"there are a lot of women who occupy high positions but at the UGTT change in this direction is not taking place. The reason is that there were no women leaders at the UGTT and the only one that was, Cherifa Massadi, was not valued enough. The struggles of women are not visible"* (S.G., activist in the field of social work).

Cherifa Messadi has had a decisive impact on the life and journey of another pioneer in public life, Dorra Bouzid, her own daughter. Daughter of a couple of activists, Dorra Bouzid was the first female Tunisian journalist who led a double media and feminist struggle. Classified as a "combat journalist", she co-founded 9 media outlets, including the first Arab-African women's magazine "Leila dans l'Action" and what would later become "Jeune Afrique" with the "Leila vous parle"<sup>48</sup> column.

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<sup>48</sup> Her career was the subject of a tribute film directed by Walid Tayaa "Une tunisienne, un combat" broadcasted on March 8, 2016 by the IFC and previewed at the JCC, November 28, 2016





*Cherifa Messadi on the front line in a public event*



*Cherifa Messadi with her husband, Mahmoud Messadi.*

## 2. The first wave of women activists: The link between feminist and class consciousness

The primary objective of the Women's Commission was born from the need to think about the intersection between unionism and feminism. In other words, to think about the link between gender and social class discrimination. Women militants and experts of the union cause have taken it upon themselves to transform the unions' vision and help to anchor equality, defend women's rights at work, and combat the inequalities they face.

It should be reminded that it was in 1977 that the day of March 8 was established as the international Women's Day by the United Nations. In 1982, the activists from the National Union of Higher Education and Scientific Research<sup>49</sup> overcame the resistances in



*Taieb Baccouche, union leader; Dorra Mahfoudh, 1st coordinator and founder of the 1st UGTT Women's Commission and Randa Alibi, founder of the Commission, on the 17th of March 1985 in the UGTT.*

<sup>49</sup> We have been elected as Deputy SG of this national union which facilitated the organization of this event in a context where liberties and autonomy from the central organization are claimed after the social foment that shook the country and the general strike of the 26th of January 78, or the "Black Thursday"



the trade union environment and the risks of "separation of workers that loomed large by celebrating this day for the first time at the UGTT. It is within this union that the problem of women at work arose for the first time and that women emerged as a political and feminist subject. The creation of a "Women's Commission" attached to the Department of Studies and Documentation, is the result of the efforts and pressures exerted by the women activists who were mostly senior and middle-level public sector teachers. These activists were trained in student unions or political left wing parties from which they departed because of sexist discrimination. Most of them claim to be part of the nucleus of the feminist group that took roots in the Tahar Haddad club. In 1980, the first 8th March is celebrated in this club under the theme "women and employment".

The support of activists who believe in equality, such as the leader Taieb Baccouche, played an important role in having this commission recognized and established<sup>50</sup>. During the 80s, several public events gathering women workers from all sectors were organized by the Women's Commission (at the Labor Exchange, at the UGTT, in the regional unions, etc.) This commission also has an important number of valuable publications which have been used as information, training, and advocacy tools by union or institutional actors. Examples of these include the reports prepared by Women's Commission experts especially for Congresses.

At the 16th Congress of the UGTT in 1984, thanks to their perseverance, women activists from the Women's Commission succeeded in preparing and including an entire dossier devoted to "The

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<sup>50</sup> In addition to Taieb Baccouche, who was the Secretary General of the UGTT, we also mention Jouneidi Abdeljaoued, a great militant unionist who during this period was Secretary General of the National Union of Higher Education and Scientific Research.

woman at work"<sup>51</sup> in the Economic and Social Report. This document deals with inadequacies and infringements of the legislation (in particular the one that is related to maternity, difficult working conditions, unequal opportunities in terms of professional and continuous training, the absence of social services meant to facilitate the work of women and their promotion, the misuse of learning and arbitrary dismissals). The report questions public policies, employers and trade unionists and incites them to take responsibility.



*UGTT-UR. Presentation of the chapter "Women and Work" before the 16th Congress that took place in 1984 in Sousse.*

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<sup>51</sup> Rapport Economique et social produit par le Bureau des Etudes de l'UGTT pour le 16ème congrès (15-20 Décembre 1984) « Pour une UGTT démocratique et juste », Chapitre sur «La femme au travail » pp. 317-332.

### 3. Women's presence in trade unions

Evaluating the place of women in unions and estimating their numbers is a difficult adventure because in the absence of an objective and homogeneous database, statistical information are fragmented, contradictory and not clearly distinguished by gender. As a consequence, the only thing we can do is rely on investigative work.



*Union activists (from left to right), Fethia Kassar, Adel Azzabi, Mohamed Khrigi Salah, Dorra Mahfoudh (1983)*

### a) The Motivations to Join a Trade Union

Trade union membership varies according to the context. It increases at the time of trade union crises, strikes and labor disputes. Our qualitative research shows that the 2011 revolution, which was triggered by a strong demand for work and dignity, and the economic crisis of the transition years, helped to (re) mobilize workers, youth and women.

According to the Department of Internal Regulations, women represent 54% of members, while they represent only 45% according to the Department of Women, Youth and Civil Society. We can therefore consider that trade union membership today concerns women as well as men and that it somehow achieves a form of parity.

Recruitment and unionization are the outcome of many factors, including the active mobilization policy of unions to recruit and raise awareness of the importance of unionization. In order to become members, workers need to be informed and convinced of their membership and the guarantees that the union can provide. This is especially true for women who are mostly facing professional and domestic constraints and obstacles (sanctions and dismissal risks, opposition of the husband or the family, etc.).

What drives women to unionize? The interviews with activists show that the motivations differ according to the sector of activity.

In the private sector, where precarity prevails, it is exploitation, injustice and disregard for social rights that force women to organize into unions. The need to join or form a union arises when problems emerge, when conflicts with the employer require members to unite the forces or to defend dismissed fellow trade unionists<sup>52</sup>. This need is also felt by women because "they know

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<sup>52</sup> When this study was being written, Secretaries General were being dismissed from the metallurgy and electronics sectors, and support strikes started to be organized

that the UGTT is the only force to defend them against low wages and lack of social security.

In the private sector, which has become the main solution in terms of finding a job for women even more than for men, affiliation is an individual or group process because the organization does not seem to have any proactive policy to recruit and organize women. Some officials confirm this when they say that :

*"Normally there should be a specific strategy for the private sector because in the public one the contribution is automatic. Women workers come to the UGTT of their own accord, for they are motivated. We should have been as enterprising in encouraging affiliation, as certain sectors that organize campaigns in industrial zones to convince women that membership guarantees their rights, as is the case in Ben Arous for example. This has always been an initiative of the Secretaries General of the private sector. The management of the UGTT, on the other hand, has no strategy which is one of the causes of the low number of women's union membership in the private sector. The truth is that the private sector is not part of the UGTT's priorities and that the labour organization has not made a clear plan for the oncoming 5 or 6 years despite the sector's importance for the future of the country!"*

### **b) Affiliation, Advantages and Risks**

Given the obstacles that prevent women from joining a union in some companies and the threats faced by women activists, the unionization process is often clandestine. Women union leaders who are familiar with the conditions in the workplace, admit that it is difficult to organize women in private companies. They state that *"When women come to us because they have a lot of problems, we ask them to pick up an application, then go to the UGTT where we give them membership cards and publish the creation of the union section. In the private sector, it is necessary to work secretly so as to help the women workers to be affiliated before the manager of the*





*Aida, Zaayi, Deputy Secretary General, Textile Federation (2016)*

*enterprise the manager of the enterprise gets wind of it. Otherwise, the women who try to start a union are dismissed before they can do so. This case happened in several companies "(trade union activist, textile sector)*

During strikes, when workers want to unionize, business leaders use their power to dissuade them. A union leader says that *"When we are contacted by the women workers in a company we hasten to inform them not to publish anything in the company and to keep the secret until the congress is held and the constitution of the union section is*

*done".*

The opposition of employers to the unionization of women has negative effects. As a matter of fact, information flows easily, and the dismissal of women workers in some companies dissuades others and discourages those who have no protection against abuse no matter how determined they can be. This also explains the low unionization of women in the private sector.

*"We are trying our hardest to keep the union activity going in the industrial zones, because being unable to form a union in one company means that union action would become impossible in ten other companies" ( Woman Militant Unionist, electronics sector).*



*A group of participants In the UGTT's congress (January 2017)*

Once they have joined and understood that the union can give them more power and voice, working women, "even the simplest" among them, show real commitment and are no longer afraid of the employer's reaction. However, other obstacles remain to be overcome, such as the family and domestic responsibilities, the objections of the husband or the family, and the negative image of the union as a sexist and male dominated world.

Women often refrain from joining a union because they fear that they can not strike a balance between their duties as mothers, employees and union activists. This is especially true in the absence of services that meet the specific needs of mothers. These problems have led unions in some countries to provide services, such as nearby child care facilities, transportation, insurance, etc.

In the public sector, where trade union activity has stronger traditions that foster unionization, women are not immune to discrimination in their professional career. They are constantly confronted with obstacles and invisible strategies to keep them away from leading positions, which is conventionally known as the "glass ceiling".

*A homage that was paid to Nejiba Bakhtri, a unionist pioneer in sports education, (UGTT-UR Ben Arous March 2016)*



We noticed this in the statements of several women activists. The following is given by one of these militants who expressed her attachment to the country and her loyalty to the public sector. She states that :

*"The access to promotion was not easy. Reaching a better position is often equated with studying hard, struggling, preparing to sit for contests and exams, which means that no one can intervene to impede your progress. Yet, when it comes to functions and responsibilities, things are different because you are recommended and generally by men. So I spent a long time watching men get promoted while I stagnated in my position until I became too competent to be ignored. I never was absent in my work and even when I gave birth I left work the same day. . I had my promotion at the end of 2000, and*

*it was a thorny one because I had to work in a risky neighborhood. This is what often happens to women. But luckily I succeeded. Then, during the revolution in 2011, the premises in which I worked were burned down. I had to move to another difficult neighborhood to take over a new position as the boss had a promotion. It took them a long time to give me the interim because it was obvious that, if I had held that position long enough, it would have been possible for me to access a high responsibility. They hesitated for a year and, being unable to do otherwise, I was given the job. There was no doubt about my professional skills, but previous experiences with women in high positions on the governorate level were not encouraging. They wondered whether I was able to lead men. They found that I was sociable, cheerful, emotional, expressing my anger if necessary. All the arguments were good to discredit me. I would have liked them to compare me to the 23 other men who hold the same position as me and not to compare me to an image of the ideal woman, to evaluate me as a manager. I am asked to do more than others, more than men are asked. I always feel obliged to go beyond my limits. My male colleagues go through the motions while I feel that I have to face challenges daily. The fact of being always on the alert tires me. In addition, I am constantly reminded of my family and domestic responsibilities. I know that I am always under the spotlight not only because I am a woman, but also because I am the only one in this high position, despite the fact that our profession is largely feminized, especially at the base. (Secretary General, 25 years in the civil service)*

This case illustrates the subordination relationships imposed on women in the professional world. It creates a sense of humiliation "a suffering at work"<sup>53</sup> which is experienced by employees who are confined in an executive function in front of a powerful hierarchy.

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<sup>53</sup> Concept used by sociologists specialized in unionism Yannick Le Quantre author « Les employées de bureau et le syndicalisme : héritage culturel, identités socioprofessionnelles et pratiques d'action collective ». Thèse de doctorat de sociologie. Université de Toulouse Le Mirail. 1996.



After 2011, to what extent has the new context changed affiliation traditions? Are workers more actively encouraged to be affiliated?

The interviews revealed that after 2011 there was a desire to revitalize the unions, to recruit, and to remobilize the bases, but this did not go beyond being individual initiatives. Many young professionals of both sexes have organized themselves. More than anywhere else, sectors where women are in union leadership adopted an active recruitment policy targeting young people of both genders:

*"I'm the Secretary General of an executive office where parity predominates. We even wanted to demand to include parity in our internal rules, but it was not possible because the status of the UGTT did not allow it. However, this right is guaranteed by the 2014 Constitution "(Young Doctor, Secretary General since 2011, SG).*

For some women union activists, the presence of women in positions of responsibility goes beyond the issue of domination and gender relations in the organization:

*"The problem of the UGTT is not the adhesions of women, it's how to yield responsibility. The real problem is deeper and goes beyond gender. In fact, the whole thing comes down to power struggles and not gender struggles. There are too many interests to preserve and a lot of favoritism. Women don't get involved in these stories and are therefore less present in positions of responsibility " (SGA sector of culture).*

Women are losing their skills because, in the tension between family and professional life, they fall into the trap of easy solutions offered by the workplace. This is what this extremely illustrative testimony shows:

*"Employers encourage women to take a vacation, so as to be able to argue that women cannot be counted on in a decision-making position since they are often absent. The boss presents himself as compas-*



*sionate and understanding, but when women claim their rights he reminds them of their absences. They are men who ostensibly declare their solidarity with women, yet it turns out that it is just a strategy to trap them. Women are often deceived and do not dare to claim a position of responsibility. Even when the superior is obliged to choose a woman, she will be compelled to keep a low profile and act in a subservient manner. " (Inspector of job).*

Young women realize that a career is not only contingent on the competence but also the ability to understand what is at issue and fight for a place. Maternity and family life impair the career and reduce the professional ambitions. They push some women to back out of the whole game and the others to struggle to strike a balance between their family and professional life. Both the workplace and society as a whole depict a positive image of men in professional leadership that presents them as more supportive and pleasant than women in positions of power. Conversely, this stereotypical image makes women dislike seeing other women occupy a higher position of power.

*"While men are united, women's relationships among themselves seems to be governed by antagonism. In addition, the patriarchal mentality makes it easier for women to be led by a man than by a woman. They wonder why they should line up behind women who have never made it whereas men have always been successful. One should naturally take the easiest way to power and success which is that of men. They are the leaders who drive the others while there are no leaders among women. This is confirmed when one looks at the political parties and realizes that the elections are a male dominated game".*

*"The UGTT is very important because it is an engine that has the strength, the capacity and the power. It organizes all the struggles and pushes things forward. It has a crucial role in the social and political scene. None the less, inside the organization, things are bubbling. Women are extremely busy, but nothing seems to change, which is not normal. In associations, things start to move "(Unionist, permanent employee in the UGTT).*

## V. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE UNION MOVEMENT

How do women unionize? Are they creative in their protest actions? Do they make solidarity efforts to expose the problems of women and gender inequalities?

### 1. The Trade Union Leadership Positions: a «Glass Ceiling»!

While they represent half of the affiliates of the UGTT (the global rate is 40%) and despite the efforts of recent years, women remain under-represented and invisible as active members but especially as militant leaders in the trade union movement.

The study on Union Renewal, conducted by the UGTT a decade ago (2006), had shown that they represent on average 9% of union officials (against 25% among members the same year). Their proportion is relatively higher at the local level and the basic delegations (13%) and much lower at the level of intermediate

*On the 25th of November 2016 in the UGTT, a debate was held on Political Violence: Kalthoum Kennou, Semia Ltaief, Wassyla Ayari, Anwar Mnasri*



structures such as regional federations and unions (4%). In accordance with the recommendations of the congress of Djerba (2002), the UGTT has made an effort to promote women within the organization and its structures by entrusting a department with this mission.

The congress that took place in the new post-revolution context in December 2011 brought together 518 delegates including 17 women (3,2%), 5 women candidates against 45 male candidates in the BE and 2 women among 22 candidates for the National Commission of the Rules of Procedure. As to the financial control commission, there was no candidate. "In Tabarka," said a unionist, "There was no motion on the women's side, we were 13 and we could not have influence on the other delegates."

Following this 22nd Congress, a group of union activists is developing a strategy to encourage more equality in union structures that are too masculinized and to fight against the "democratic deficit" represented by the low representation of women. It ends with the organization of an Advocacy Campaign (last semester of 2016), a few weeks before the 23rd Congress (January 2017).

By questioning "The Genre of Syndicalism", the French sociologist specialized in unionism Yannick le Quantrec<sup>54</sup> speaks of "stall between women membership and women's share in the representation bodies where they are insufficiently nominated as candidates and even less eligible". At this stall, it adds a qualitative deficit "The ambivalence of unions towards equality issues and their internal functioning".

The Women-Commission's journey, which is more than thirty years old, and its current situation illustrate this union "ambivalence".

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<sup>54</sup> « Les militantes syndicales : une égalité à faire vivre ». In Revue Internationale Sens Public, Article published on line 2009/05

After the UGTT crisis in the late 1980s, the Commission resumed its activities within the Department of Studies and Documentation. But while the founding group was formed on the basis of volunteerism and autonomy, the second group is made up of "women of the apparatus" and the coordinators of the national and regional commissions are appointed by the regional union leaders and the new "Department of Women, Young Workers and Associations". It was during the 1990s that the demands on women's rights, social and economic rights, were integrated in the speeches of the men unionists but not yet in the union body and structures. In 2005 a circular (No. 74 of 4 March 2005 of the Department of Women, Youth and Associations) is sent to all Regional Unions for the renewal of commissions. Only in 2010 are they elected



*Raoudha Gharbi, militant unionist, talking about her research on Tahar Haddad. (December 2016)*



by their peers. The ambiguity surrounding the recruitment and composition of this female structure may over time undermine its credibility. That is why, as part of the amendments to the status and rules of procedure of the UGTT, proposed to the congress of January 2017, the lawyers charged with this task<sup>55</sup> recommend a structure constituted on the basis of transparent and democratic elections that start at the level of regional unions (in coordination with national federations and unions) and reach the level of the national commission.



Mohamed Mselmi, Deputy Secretary  
General responsible for trade union training.

Because of the vagueness surrounding its structure and its composition, the Women's Commission is in the current context the subject of criticisms and unmet expectations:

*"The Women's Commission should be a locomotive and as a locomotive it must train and reunite. Today the commission is asked to advance equality in the unions. We must unite and forget our differences. Members mobilize, spend out of their own pocket and give their time. But they have neither the means nor the power of decision and when there is only one woman in an executive office of a regional union what can she do?" (SGA, Regional Union)*

<sup>55</sup> We refer to the proposal of Med Guesmi, a legal expert of the UGTT at the Trade Union University organized by the Department of Women, Young Workers and Associations from 25 to 27 January 2015, published in the Jadal Bulletin, page 22.



Some trade unionists are more realistic and insist on the need to compromise, build positive alliances with those in power and develop strategies:

*"To have weight and value, the Women's Commission must have a solid foundation. Then, depending on the cause to defend, it will be supported by both women and men. I think that the woman must use her intelligence. She does not have the key and must therefore get along with the landlord to open the door or to share the house with her". (Trade union leader, Youth and Children Sector).*

In the union space, as in the professional space, power issues are accompanied by physical, psychological and sexual harassment. Trade union activists are twice the target of verbal violence, as evidenced by recent surveys.<sup>56</sup> They were little mentioned in the interviews we conducted. However, referring to the intervention of the representatives of the UGTT at the Copenhagen Congress (23-30 November 2015), we note that "this scourge has spread in society and in the workplace at all levels in private as well as public sector enterprises, in educational establishments and specifically women working in the informal economy, in subcontracting jobs, or domestic workers, rural women, etc. »<sup>57</sup>.

## 2. The Impact of the Family Responsibilities on the Union Career

Important steps to increase women's union participation have been requested since the beginning of the Women's Commission in the 1980s, but they are still not considered a priority in the negotiations. Women activists manage the interactions between, and juggle with, personal, familial, professional and militant responsibilities. While male activists escape private pressure by

<sup>56</sup> That of ONFP in 2010 and that of CREDIF on violence in the public space (2026) and that of IDA on political violence (2016)

<sup>57</sup> Paper by Leila Daami, Deputy Secretary General of the National Union of Culture. In Jadal, Internal Bulletin of the Department of Women Workers, Young People and Civil Society, No. 4, January 2015, page 45 (in Arabic)

partitioning the public sphere and private sphere, even allowing themselves to be invaded by the trade union role, women activists, on the contrary, are under the weight of the domestic and the marital pressures. Also, they try, without much success, to strike a balance between the private sphere and the professional and militant sphere. This testimony is most significant :

*"I am campaigning not to have a bad conscience, to reorder my priorities and to give what I can. I learned to compartmentalize my multiple roles and I admit that I can forget things at home. I admit that I am not always competent. When I'm at work, I forget my other roles. At home, I turn my back on my other roles. I know it's not always easy to switch from one role to another. I am also a citizen or active in an association or a party and if you want to follow and participate, it is not easy. But these are challenges we must meet "(Inspector, union leader).*

Women imagine all sorts of strategies to accomplish their multiple roles, avoiding for example the accumulation of responsibilities. By engaging in a militant career, women trade unionists are especially interested in keeping in touch with their professional life and do not wish to become permanent activists for life.



*From left to right: Samir Cheffi, Deputy Secretary General of the Women, Youth and Associations Department, Hayet Trabelsi Deputy Secretary General, Federation of Professions and Services, Souad Triki one of the founders of the Women's Commission, (UGTT November 2016)*

Also, according to some testimonies that the model of success being always masculine, the feminine solidarity is not often observable:

*"I am the first woman after Cherifa Massadi to join the UGTT board. We are 3 women out of 83 men and in our interventions we do not support one another "(SG, Federation of trades and professions).*

*"It is necessary that the women are always visible, in the demonstrations, the media and the social networks. Those who participate in UGTT's international events must give back and benefit other women because they have the double role of women and trade unionists. It is necessary to create feminine icons by the solidarity between all women. Not only are we forgotten at the UGTT but we also we exclude each other ". (Trade Unionist, Teacher)*

We also noted a persisting phenomenon that existed when we wanted to create the first women's Commission. Both women and trade unionists, some militant generations who have no anchor in the feminist movement, live "conflicts of causes"<sup>58</sup>, between solidarity of gender and solidarity of social class (or political affiliation). These conflicts can be seen when women defend equality between men and women and advocate for positive discrimination measures, but do not make the cause of women a priority and do not present themselves as feminists.

In short, it can be said that despite the constraints and the obstacles, the women activists, whether they are within Women's Commissions or in the unions, are trying to develop strategies and actions to be recognized, to make their voices heard and to demand more equality. Women activists have been encouraged by their involvement in the democratic process inside and outside the organization and the achievements of the 2014 Constitution.

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<sup>58</sup> This conflict was observed by other specialists of women's unionism since the 1970s, particularly by Sophie Pochic in her article « Femmes responsables syndicales en Angleterre et identification féministe . Naturaliser leur genre pour mieux représenter leur classe » in Sociologies (online), N ° 4, Vol.5, 2014.



*Poster of the campaign for women's access to union leadership (August 13, 2016 to January 25, 2017). "Against oblivion" honoring the first activists and highlighting the struggles*



## VI. THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT CONFRONTED BY WOMEN



*Partners in the fight, partners in the decision*

Despite the progress made, we have identified a variety of structural and internal barriers to integrating the culture of equality into the organization. They relate to the functioning of the trade union structures. On this point, the studies have always emphasized that the unions are complex structures; whose speech and functioning remain obscure to the layman and even to the basic trade unionist.

### 1. A Majority of Members, a Minority of Decision Makers

It is in the wake of the social movement of January 14, 2011, in a context of hope for change and political and social issues that the 22nd congress of the UGTT took place (25-28 December 2011 in Tabarka). Of the 518 conference delegates, 12 women (2.3%) were fortunate enough to be selected as delegates by their grassroots unions.





*Activists in front of the UGTT (December 2016)*

Three lists presented, 64 successful candidates including 5 women (8%). No woman is elected to the new executive office! As in previous congresses, the issue of women's quotas was raised, especially by women, but the congressmen postponed it again, saying it was "difficult to deal with at the time of Congress and that it would be the main subject of a forthcoming National Council devoted to this purpose".

The candidates, however, were fighters and met the selective criteria. They had a long history of union activism, sometimes about four decades. They are known figures, considered as competent and representative as any other candidate. Of the 518 delegates present in Tabarka, only 12 women were chosen at the base to represent their unions. However, investigations in and outside the union recognize their ability to lead and supervise.

How does one make sense of this set of invisible obstacles that prevent women from accessing high levels of responsibility? And how can women overcome this ceiling of glass which, by weight, becomes an iron ceiling?

Discrimination against women is not necessarily active and visible. It is the result of prejudices and social norms of sexism, but also of the organizational culture and the type of functioning of the trade union organization. Like those which preceded it, the 22nd Congress has once again revealed the extent of male resistance to the inclusion of women.

A return to the history of the central union shows that the women's issue has long been absent from trade union concerns. This is how the 1956 moral report fails due to significant omissions. To "promote the popular masses" the UGTT appeals to the workers, small peasant officials, young people, forgetting in these categories "women". As women become more visible in the job market and in the various professions, the 1977 UGTT congress could no longer ignore them (since they were already one quarter of the active population) and proposed "a half-time system" that was favorable to the woman who works outside her home. This formula is able to help improve the productivity of sectors such as education, hospitals and factories and contribute to the stability of the family ".

It is in the moral report of the 1984 congress which proposes to make a retrospective and critical analysis and to outline the contours of a new society, that a chapter is devoted to "The woman at work". It is developed by the women activists of the "Commission of Study of the Working Woman" which had just been created.

Today it is no longer possible to ignore the role of women in the labor movement. Both the few studies<sup>59</sup> and the testimonies, recognize that the status of women in the union institution is a weak point of the UGTT. : *"The UGTT is vulnerable and cannot continue like this. We do not talk about the internal problems because of the context but it cannot last long "(a long-time union activist).*

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<sup>59</sup> See Diagnosis of the UGTT by its managers, op.cit.

Despite the progress made, we have identified a variety of structural and internal barriers to integrating the culture of equality into the organization. They relate to the functioning of the trade union structures. On this point, the studies have always emphasized that the unions are complex structures; whose speech and functioning remain obscure to the layman and even to the basic trade unionist.

The functioning of the UGTT and its different structures as they stand, contributes directly or indirectly to the exclusion of women. Some aspects are: the accumulation of the number of mandates (national, federal, sectoral, basic) and over time (more than 10 years at the same position), the frequency and format of meetings, access to responsibilities. For example, one of the ways to keep women away is to portray unionism as "a men's affair" or a professional job, or to see it as an available activist, free from family responsibility and totally dedicated to his union career.

*Militants in front of the portraits of Farhat Hached and Habib Achour (November 2016)*



The role of cooptation networks, which are widespread in the trade union field, as in the political field, plays a decisive role in the elections and during the congresses. It is very difficult or almost impossible to be elected if you are not on a list. These networks are lacking for women.

In past decades, attempts to establish equality in trade union organization, though not negligible, have not translated into real equality. The introduction of parity in the Constitution is being resisted. The corrective measures of inequalities, such as quotas, which were proposed during the 2011 Congress, were not unanimous and it was planned to submit them for discussion at the next Congress.

In the context of the recompositions that civil society actors are undergoing today, what efforts are being made to adapt the functioning of trade union structures in order to make possible the integration of true gender equality?

## 2. Encouraging Signs of an Oncoming Change

Recent actions in favor of equality are undertaken in the form of proposals for legal reforms, training programs for women activists and exchanges of experiences with other countries and studies diagnosing the place of women in new forms of precarious jobs. However, it is difficult to say to what extent women are involved in this process and at which levels.





*Two candidates in the 23rd UGTT congress: Wassyla Ayachi and Naïma Hammami (January 2017)*



• **"The Charter of Equality in Trade Unions"** is a document in which "the UGTT is committed to integrating the gender approach in all areas, amending the statute and rules of procedure to create a climate conducive to equality in the management and decision-making bodies, to collect disaggregated data by sex and to undertake positive actions for the representation of women in UGTT structures (Quotas, reserved seats, decision-making attributions to women's committees, empower women to become leaders in the UGTT structures<sup>60</sup>). It is obvious that this Charter is a step forward and an important foundation of values for achieving equality, if it has a decision-making effect, quantified objectives and regular evaluations.

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<sup>60</sup> Equality Charter published in 2016 in the Jadal Internal Bulletin, Department of Women, Young Workers and Associations



• ***The integration of measures that are favorable to women into the new status of the UGTT*** "Equality between citizens" is one of

the general aims and principles of the organization (Article 2, point 4)<sup>61</sup>. Amendments are made and proposed for discussion at the next Congress, in the form of positive actions such as quotas (Article 3), so that the Women's Commission is constituted on the basis of elections and women are represented in each decision structure. This measure, which will come into effect only after the January 2017 congress, would be applied to the various national, regional, local, sectoral structures (congresses, national council, administrative commission, etc.) as well as to the control structures (Articles 10, 14, 18 and 87)

• ***Many training sessions*** have been organized in recent years targeting activists. They focus on women's economic and social rights, communication, leadership, the issue of equality in collective bargaining, women's participation in the process of national and international representation, international legislation and instruments that promote gender equality, etc. The seminars contributed to the development of women's skills and the consolidation of the know-how within women's commissions.

• ***Studies*** are recently undertaken by the organization to better understand women's conditions and gender inequalities in the labor market. The most recent is one of the few surveys of women in the informal economy<sup>62</sup>, the state of their social rights providing a solid basis for the advocacy actions of the trade union.

• ***Building alliances with unions in other countries*** that support the promotion of equality in trade union structures. For example, LO Norway (the largest union in Norway, where women make up 50%), Nexus (EmigliaRomana - Italy). Links are also being developed with the service unions, including UNI Global Union, which brings together 20 million service sector workers.

<sup>61</sup> Internal document relating to the draft Statute of the UGTT proposed by the Department of Internal Regulations at the congress of January 22, 2017. Page 3 (version in Arabic language)

<sup>62</sup> « La femme tunisienne dans l'économie informelle. Réalités et solutions possibles du point de vue syndical ». Op.cit. 2016



*A UGTT delegation invited by German unions (Berlin 2004)*

Observations and interviews show that there is still a discrepancy between the leaders' speeches (recalling the values of social justice, democracy, solidarity, decent work, etc.) and the practices and capacities of intervention in the field of equality, but timid changes, although rare it is true, are emerging among young activists. They stand out from the dominant patriarchal and paternalistic ideology, publicly challenging the division of roles between men and women at the root of inequality. They say that they are willing to take into account the responsibilities of their spouses and the demands of family life. They negotiate the schedules of the militant activity according to their responsibilities in the private life and do not hesitate to prioritize the interest of their children over their union involvement.



*A homage paid by the League of Tunisian Women Voters and the Arab Institute of Human Rights to the founders of the Women's Commission of the UGTT (March 2016)*

### 3. The 23rd January 2017 Congress: an Important step toward Equality, yet Much More Is to Be Done

The 23rd Congress, which took place from 22 to 26 January 2017, demonstrates an effort to promote women in decision-making positions. It brought together 547 delegates including 37 women,



*In front of the tent of women trade unionists on the occasion of the 23rd UGTT congress (January 2017)*





*Wassyla Ayachi Deputy Secretary  
General U.R. UGTT Ben Arous*



*Bakhta Jmour militant unionist present  
at the scene of the 23rd UGTT congress*

49 candidates including 6 women (one of them withdrew on the eve of the congress). Two competing lists present two candidates. For the first time, after the pioneer Chérifa Messadi, a woman is elected to the Executive Bureau of the UGTT (out of the 13 seats of the BE). This is Naima Hammami, a veteran teacher and labor activist. Two other activists were also elected, one to the Committee on Financial Control (Fadhila Melliti, sociologist by training, child sector executive and trainer at UGTT), and the other to the Rules Committee. The principle of the quota accepted despite some resistance (90 delegates voted against) provides that in all



*Militant unionists  
in the 23rd  
congress of the  
UGTT*

*Emna Aouadi, militant unionist and one of the organizers of the companion for women's access to leadership. (the 7th of December 2016)*



union structures there will be the election of at least two women. These and other results, such as not having multiple successive terms, are an important step on the road to women's equality and access to union leadership. But they are unsatisfactory with regard to a joint union base where women now represent more than 50% of the UGTT workforce. The results could also have been better given the mobilization and activism of women at all levels and throughout the history of the central union and their demands as well as the principles and values declared by the organization and the principles of parity in the constitution.

*The Saïd Gagui room in the UGTT (the 7th of December 2016)*





## VII. THE TRADE UNION CULTURE AND THE RESISTANCES TO EQUALITY

Trade unionism is not an autonomous field, it is closely linked to the social sphere and to the power relationships that pervade society. Also, to understand the union culture we need to question both the practices and the representations of the unionists.

### 1. The Burden of the Discriminative Stereotypes

Studies of attitudes toward women's union and political participation confirm contradictory social attitudes about women's roles in union and political public life.

*Fadhila Melliti, a union activist, who was elected at the 23rd UGTT congress as a member of the Financial Control Committee*



In one of our surveys, we asked the following question to union members: "In the next union election, would you vote for a woman?" An overwhelming majority (82% of men and 91% of women) said that they would vote for a woman. However, they think that the place of women is rather in a local or grassroots union (55%), or in a regional union (28%). As for the access of a woman unionist to the executive committee of the UGTT, it is envisaged only by a minority of 17%. This is a revealing illustration of the effect of gender stereotypes that deny women unionists the access to decision making and leadership in spite of their competence, their commitment to the trade union cause, and the fact that their number amounts to, it is worth reminding, half of the affiliates.



*Dorra Bouzid, first Tunisian journalist, feminist activist and daughter of Chérifa Messadi, first woman union militant*

Preventing women union activists from accessing decision-making positions in the structures is caused by men's long union careers, their repetitive reelections for high positions, and the co-optation networks they dominate. Another reason is the obstacles and blockages in the exercise of democratic governance within the central trade union. In addition to these impediments, one can mention the chauvinistic and paternalistic culture that insidiously excludes women from the centers of decision. This is confirmed by an activist from Sfax who stresses that: *"The UGTT counts a fair number of women, yet they are not visible, and they do not come and attend. Besides, an accusing finger is constantly pointed at those who come on Saturdays or Sundays"*.

Women trade unionists are often mobilized for actions on the ground, in companies or in public events. However, they are excluded from decision-making, especially through the choice of places and meeting times. They are sent back to their domestic world. This idea is corroborated by an other activist who points out that: *"Women lead strikes, but can not go to the UGTT because they have to go home to cook"* (Trade Unionist-Le Kef).

The social practices and representations relating to the role of men and women, and the share of these latter in the distribution of power, are expressed in the form of fixed images and gender stereotypes that maintain discrimination and marginalize women. Discourses often focus on the "incompetence" of women in leading roles so as to justify their assignment in junior positions and to thwart their legitimate ambitions for many years.

## 2. The Pretext of women's incompetence in Leadership Positions

In a previous work on the participation of Tunisian women in the political life<sup>63</sup>, we have shown, that competence is a social construction in which the actors of the political and social field participate. Three levels of competence are to be distinguished: a "technical and cognitive competence" which requires the acquisition of a specific knowledge of the field (a political habitus as Bourdieu calls it). For example to know the names of the current and past personalities and leaders, be informed about the major problems, know how to make a speech, have a political opinion, and make choices. The second is the juridical competence. It is the legally recognized ability of a man or a woman to act in a particular way and under given conditions. Finally, there is a "social" aspect to this competence whereby society attributes politics, the public place, wage labor to men, and assigns domestic work, invisible activities related to the relational and the emotional to women. This social construction of competence builds union gender identity and (re) creates the difference and the social division in militant work between the sexes.

Previous studies had already shown that the labor organization is a "contradictory totality"<sup>64</sup> made up of groups and individuals who share common values and a (set of references) that have been mobilized in times of crisis to face external threats. Nevertheless, union culture and social stereotypes influence the construction of male and female identities reinforcing the gender effects. In other words, men are rather given the political roles and women the technical ones. Conversely, the organizational culture imposes a certain homogeneity of attitudes and "authorized"

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<sup>63</sup> Dorra Mahfoudh, « Tunisiennes et action politique en contexte postrévolutionnaire, Editions CREDIF 2014.

<sup>64</sup> See particularly Salah Hamzaou's thesis, « Pratiques syndicales et pouvoir politique : pour une sociologie des cadres syndicaux (cas de la Tunisie) », Soutenu à Paris 7, 2013

discourses. This appears to be a condition for the inclusion of activists. Consequently, it systematically leads to the marginalization of dissonant voices and discourses, which in this case, are those of women.

The testimonies showed that women have a different vision of unionism, forms of action and ways of doing things:

*"Let's go back to our realities, ... union action should not be equated with banditry. It is rather a set of records and means to convince and respect our interlocutor and reject vulgarity. We carry a project, we know the problem of the social security which was inexhaustible. There were wrong practices, but there were also wrong policies ... The SG criminalized and insulted us. In the UGTT, we say that principles are important, yet it is the strongest who always has the final say, and we must be obedient ! » SG - Private sector*

We have noted a difference that has been emphasized many times between the emancipatory and egalitarian vision of women and the paternalistic and domineering vision of men:

*"We unfortunately do not agree. Women want women to represent them. Men, on the other hand, want a woman who does not see or speak; they want her just to execute "(A union official, private sector).*

Several activists are overtly dissatisfied:

*"Today, the Tunisian trade union movement must be able to modernize itself. The status of women is only the tip of the iceberg. What has to be changed is the functioning, the vision, the fields of action, and the ways of acting. There are things that have to be redefined. One only has to see the average age of the members of the CA. Some have spent more than 15 years in their functions, ... which is shameful ". (Trade union leader, health sector)*

*From the conducted interviews, the documents consulted and the observation-participant of the trade union milieu, we have noticed more than once that the trade union organization is out of step both with*



*the principles of equality that it advocates in the world of work and the new demands of the socio-political context. Its legitimacy, which is derived from its historical importance and its capacity to solve the problems that exist here and now for the oppressed and the dominated, has not been enough to create an awareness to consider women's problems as a political issue. Moreover, it failed to undermine the patriarchal social organization.*



*The elected representatives in the 23rd UGTT congress: Naïma Hammami (executive bureau), Fadhlila Melliti (financial control commission), Hamida Akkari (commission of internal rules)*

## VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The feminization of trade unions and trade unionism is now recognized by all, even if the structures and institutions remain male-dominated. Through their presence, their participation and their struggle and despite the many obstacles in society, in the world of work and in the unions, women continue to shake up the patriarchal and trade union order and force the women activists to reconsider the misconceptions about trade unions.

In order for the UGTT to be consistent with its principles, in line with its environment and with the societal evolution, it must pay more attention to the cause of women, and include in its priorities the rights of women workers of all categories (particularly the most vulnerable, women workers in rural areas or the informal economy, domestic workers, etc.), as well as the rights of women trade unionists and activists outside and inside the organization.

Incentives have been proven elsewhere, they could be tested, such as requiring the presence of one woman for three delegates at the national congress or changing the statutes of trade union structures to encourage them to apply parity in the unions responsibilities.

With the key actors of the civil society, the unions could implement voluntarist measures for equality and parity, establish a real democracy and work for the constitution of union organizations that is professional, inclusive and representative of the whole population, and having a social legitimacy that gives female citizens as well as their male counterparts the opportunity to access new rights in work and society.

By its social function, the UGTT can play an important role in favor of the rights of both women and men workers. It can develop internally and externally solidarities that combat all forms of exclusion and domination including male domination. Women have confirmed that they are essential actors of change in social relations of power. By entering into a tradition of historical egalitarian activists like Tahar Haddad or dedicated activists like Cherifa Messadi, trade unionists now have a role to play in the dual struggle against social injustice and gender injustice. In addition to effectively encouraging women's leadership in decision-making bodies, they could, building on legal and constitutional achievements, establish an equality plan that would improve the position of women in trade union structures and their representativeness. They could also facilitate the adoption of a transversal approach to equality which, beyond representation, includes the gender perspective in all trade union strategies and practices (fight against professional inequalities, integration of equality in collective bargaining, developing work-family balance measures, developing a better organization of working hours, etc.).



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## ILLUSTRATIONS



*The UGTT's congress in May 1949, " Union leads to freedom"  
Cherifa Messadi, on her right Farhat Hachad, on her left Mahmoud Messadi and Habib Chatti.*



*The parade of the UGTT in 1949*



*Launch of the campaign to promote women in union leadership (UGTT November 2016)*



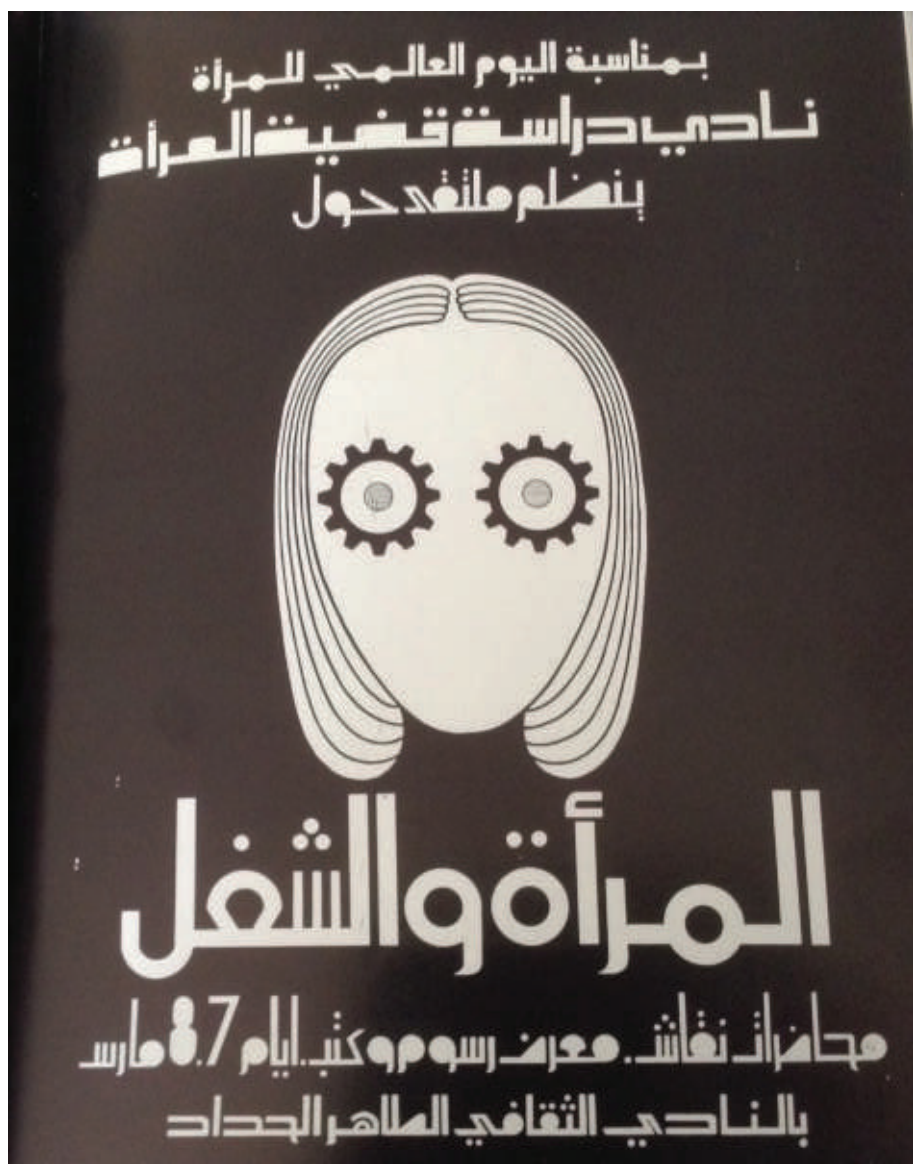
*"The unity of the UGTT is the union of the workers" (from left to right Khereddin Bousleh, Leila Hamrouni, Dorra Mahfoudh, Ismail Sahbani)*











*1st Poster celebrating International Women's day on the 8th of March (photo Merchaoui).*

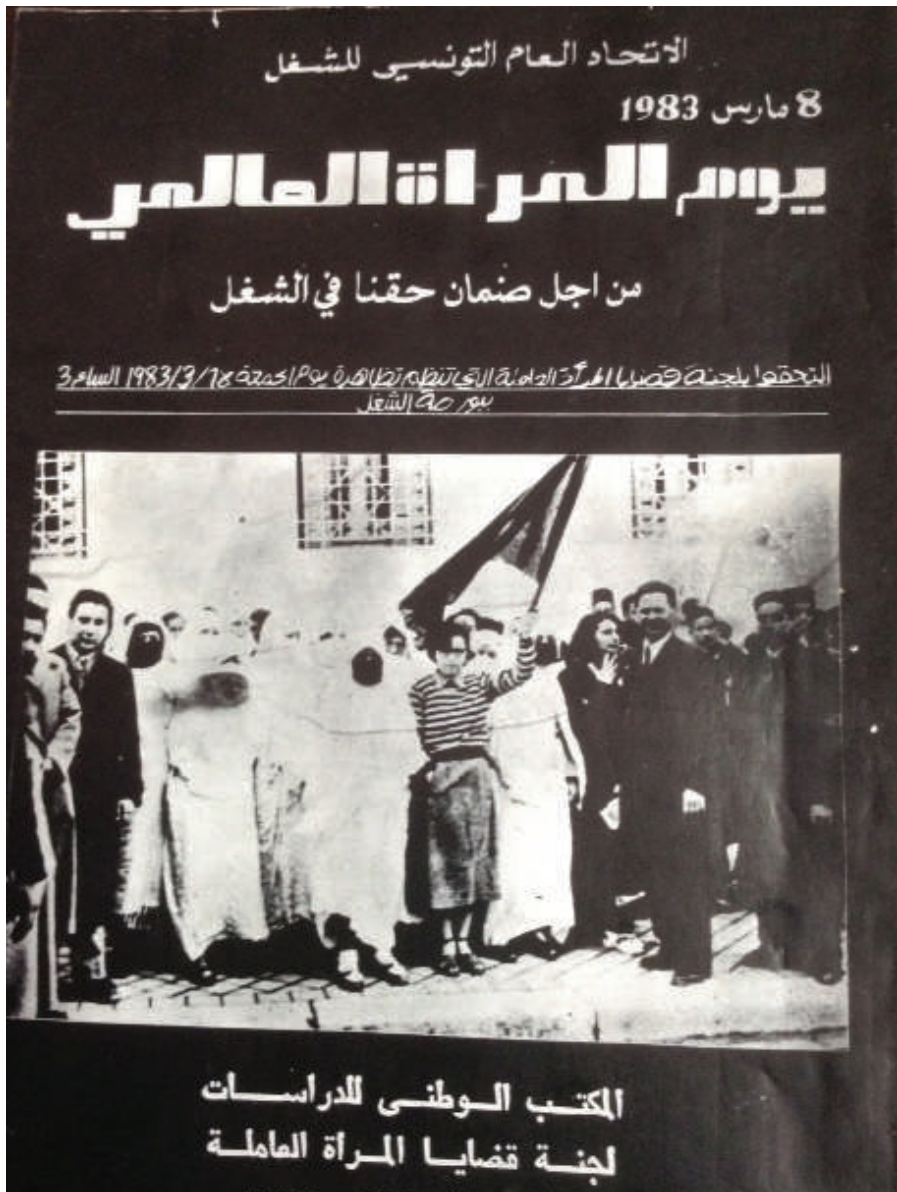
*Cultural event organized by the feminists at the cultural club for the study of the status of women (from the 7th to the 8th of March 1980).*



*Poster of the 8th of March 1982 (caricature by Marchaoui)*

*The first 8th of March, International Women's Day, organized by the National Union of Higher Education (SNES) chaired by Taieb Baccouche, Secretary General of the UGTT and Jouneidi Abdeljaoued, Secretary General of THE SNES.*

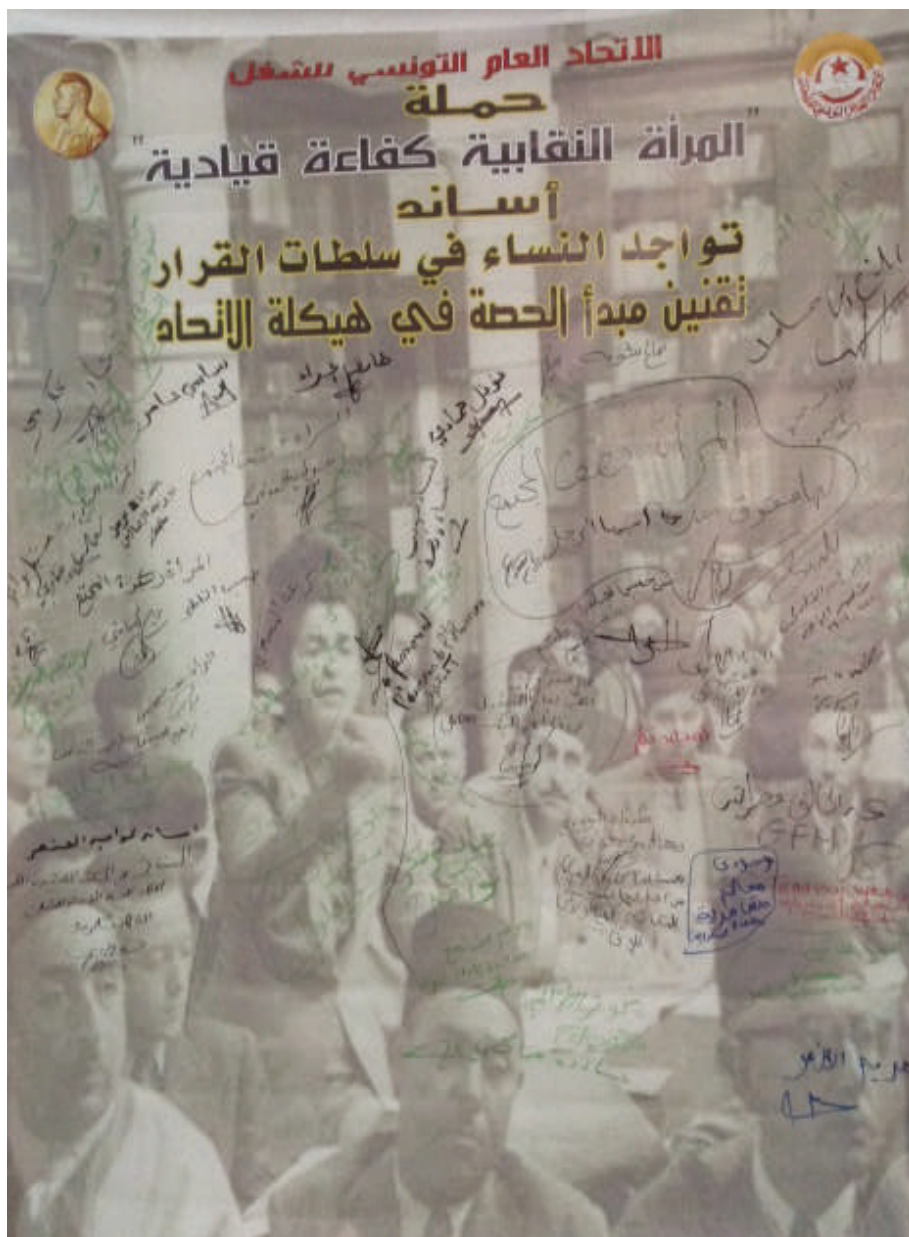
*Dorra Mahfoudh Assistant Secretary General of SNES, Souad Triki and Hafidha Chekir Faculty of Law and Economics Union*



**Poster: Women's strike in the health sector with FarhatHached (1951)**

Cover of the brochure of the UGTT's Women Workers Commission on the overview of the activities undertaken during the first 2 years (1983 - 1984) and including the list of 55 women founders.





Poster of the campaign for women's access to union leadership (from the 13th of August 2016 to the 25th of January 2017)

Slogan of the campaign: the woman unionist, a national competence. I endorse the presence of women in the decision-making bodies and demand the legalization of quotas in the structures of the UGTT (submitted to the signature of the participants in the campaign)





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