

Report of the New Woman Foundation about The state of Egyptian female workers in the industrial sector

1. The Organization

The New Woman Foundation (NWF) is an Egyptian feminist advocacy NGO that began its activities in 1984 as an informal study group. It was registered in 1991 as a civil company, and then in 2004 under Law 84/2002 with the Ministry of Social Solidarity as a private Foundation. NWF believes in women's unconditional rights, and considers the struggle for women's liberation as part of a wider struggle for democracy and social justice. NWF activities include action-oriented research and studies, monitoring violations of women's rights and launching campaigns, providing training to community based organizations and their constituencies, helping women organize themselves, organizing seminars and workshops, mobilizing the media, and issuing publications and reports.

2. Summary of the report

The Egyptian government's adoption of the privatization and structural adjustment policies under the pressure of the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) since 1993 has caused greater impoverishment, as a result of the government's gradual phasing out of providing basic social services. This has adversely affected women, especially in the areas of education, health care, employment, water and housing, with a marked inflation, reflected in an increase of 32.5% year-on-year on food prices¹. Women also suffer from discrimination in employment, as they do not enjoy equal rights, especially when it comes to female workers as well as women working in the informal sector who are left outside the scope of legal protection. Furthermore, women are exposed to several forms of violence within their working environment, such as discrimination, sexual harassment, rape, etc.. The present report is based on the findings of two documents produced by NWF; the first is considered to be the first research of this type conducted about female workers under the impact of structural adjustment policies and included a sample of 600 female workers. The report was published by the end of 2007 together with an annexed booklet that included the proceedings of two workshops conducted in 2007 with women workers. The second is a report on sexual harassment in industrial zones prepared in 2009 that included 40 case studies.

3. The report

3.1 Women's labor cannot be examined without discussing the economic transformations witnessed by Egypt during the past decades, and their impact on the socio-economic conditions of workers in general and female workers in particular. Since the late 1970s, the Egyptian government started to follow a trend of adopting an open market economy which led to purposely neglecting the industrial public sector that soon thereafter deteriorated rapidly and showed signs of weak performance. This eventually led to its privatization since 1993 and under the pressures by the WB and the IMF, the Egyptian government started to implement privatization and structural adjustment policies. With Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif's forming his new government in 2004, this process was highly accelerated and the government stopped investing to improve the industrial sector. Several laws were enacted including the Unified Labor Law Number 12/2003 that abolished permanent labor, consecrated temporary, occasional and seasonal labor, and allowed employers abandon their commitments towards workers. At the same time, the government froze salaries, promotions, gradually withdrew from subsidizing several basic services, while inflation on the rise.

¹ <http://www.middle-east-online/english/egypt/?id=27352>.

Accordingly, workers lost any feeling of security either at the work place or at home where they became unable to satisfy the most basic needs of the household, pushing for women to work on increasing their economic contribution.

3.2 The New Woman Foundation published in 2007 a research paper titled "Women in the Labor Market" conducted during 2006-2007 on a sample of 600 female workers in various industrial fields and from various geographic areas. The research focused on fields where there is a high density of female labor and included the areas of textiles, chemical products, and assembling of electronics. It is worth mentioning that women's labor is especially dense in the investment zones in the industries of garments and textiles. Although this sample is not representative of all women workers in Egypt, it provides important indicators that should be taken in consideration. It was concluded that 88% of the overall sample belong to poor families and have to contribute part or all their salary (62%) in the household, and that 88% are forced to work due to their dire financial need. Therefore, the main motive behind joining the labor force is the urgent need to obtain an income regardless of how small such income may be. Moreover, the inferior social and cultural status of these women contributes to exposing them to several forms of exploitation, violence and discrimination at the work place. Statistics show that 14.2% are illiterate and 5.8% can only read and write. Actually, the Unified Labor Law No. 12/ 2003 has contributed in cutting down several benefits female workers have previously enjoyed; article 91 of the new modified law states that women are not allowed to obtain a maternity leave before having spent 10 months at the workplace, unlike the whereas of the old law stated maternity leave be given after 6 months only. Employers take advantage of this article, especially with female workers under temporary or seasonal contracts - mainly within the private and the investment sectors - to conclude contracts of less than 10 months. Moreover, if a woman gets married during the contract period, usually the contract is not renewed. Article 94 of the same law has restricted child care leaves without pay to twice while under the previous law it was granted three times during the entire period of service. The same research paper concluded unmarried girls in the investment sector amount to 60% of the overall sample compared to 22% in the public sector. According to the interviewees, this results from the unwillingness of employers to bare the cost of the reproductive role of women, leading to a clear preference for unmarried workers. In the investment sector around 46% of female workers were in the age bracket between 20 and 30 years of age and 22% under the age of 18 (which represents a violation of the Law). Article 96 of the same Law necessitates that there be at least 100 female workers in the workplace for the employer to be legally obliged to establish a nursery – or contract a nursery – to provide child care for nursing female workers. In fact, workers in investment and private sectors are totally deprived of this service and in the factories of the public sector that are put for sale or those with nurseries are intentionally closed down, the land on which they are built is put for sale.

3.3 Regarding the scale of wages, Article 34 of Law 12/2003 stipulates the establishment of a national council for wages led by the Minister of Planning and responsible for setting the minimum guaranteed wage at the national level in accordance with the cost of living, as well as finding the necessary procedures to establish a balance between wages and prices. However, this council has not been fulfilling this task since the enactment of the law in question. According to the present field study, the basic monthly salary of 39.17% of the sample interviewed lies in the bracket of 100 to 200 LE (around 17US\$ to 34 US\$), followed by 29.50% that lie within the bracket of 200 to 300 LE (34US\$ - 50US\$), followed by mere 9.33% earning between 600 and 700 LE (100US\$ - 117US\$). Obviously, these figures are incompatible with the cost of living in Egypt. Moreover, the low scale of salaries impacts

any other potential benefit such as promotions, share of benefits or incentives. This has led workers from both sexes to initiate large-scale movements (including strikes, sit-in, etc.) during the past four years. However, in addition to the general deteriorated conditions, female workers are subject to another kind of discrimination that is related to their socio-cultural conditions as was shown in the same study. According to the testimonies of several women belonging to various governorates, the starting salary of females is lower than that of males. Moreover, female workers are deprived of the opportunity of promotion or of occupying supervisory positions. They usually are temporary workers that can be dispensed of at any time as a consequence of their reproductive role within the family. The same study points to an important gap between the percentages of male supervisors compared to that of female supervisors, which is multiple in the production sectors that are mainly run by women. Marginalization of women is especially noticeable in the chemical and electronics industries where female supervisors amount to 2% and 3% consecutively. In the investment zones, an incentive for regular attendance amounting to 100 LE (around 17 US\$) is set, yet, if absent for one day workers are completely denied this incentive. This is particularly true for women who might be obliged to stay home for illness of a child, for tasks related to the household, caring for the elderly, or other similar gender-related roles, especially that they are required to work for almost twelve hours per day in addition to their other responsibilities. The study indicates that over 26% of the sample worked more than eight hours per day and almost 40% worked during official holidays, and that for 66% of the sample over time was compulsory. In a number of investment zones located in the governorates of Alexandria, Suez, Port-Said and Ismailiah, NWF interviewed a sample of 40 female workers. Some of the respondents claimed that they sometimes have put in extra working hours that in some cases means that they work till midnight without being paid overtime, or given a day off in replacement. And, if they were absent as a result the next day, they would lose the incentive for regular attendance.

3.4 The research study indicates three types of contractual relations:

- *Permanent contracts* where the number of permanently hired reached around 59% among workers in the public sector against 38% in the private sector firms that belonged to companies originally owned by the public sector and sold to an investor, or to private sector companies established before the process of privatization and open market policies. According to the respondents, this type of contracting did not occur either in the public or private sectors after year 1990.
- *Temporary contracts*: 28% of the sample of female workers in the public sector are contracted under this type of contracting against 26% in the private sector. Around 7% of workers in the public sector under this kind of contracting are covered by social security compared to almost 15% working in the private sector.
- *Work without contract*: Findings indicate a high percentage of workers working without a contract in both the private and public sectors, reaching 35% for the private sector and around 12% for the public sector.

3.5 Regarding discrepancies between the three studied industrial fields examined, we find the sector of electronics to be the most stable with a higher percentage of workers working under contract in both private and public sectors (93%) with an almost non-existent percentage working without a contract. At the same time, the percentage of those working without contracts rises in the chemical and textile sectors (consecutively 74% and 31% for the private sector, and 1% and 34% for the public sector). Another finding concluded that most of those hired under temporary contracts do not possess a copy of their contracts. The study, as well as other field work conducted by NWF reveal that in most factories, at the signature of the

contract, workers are required to sign form number 6 (which is the form to be signed at the time of resignation in order to stop paying the annuities of social security). Workers working without contracts do not enjoy any benefits, such as right to social security, health insurance, or establishing a trade union. Moreover, Law 12/1995 on trade unions includes in Article 36 a condition that prevents anybody with a temporary contract from being eligible on the administrative board of the trade union.

3.6 Findings of the study indicate the exposure of female workers to several professional risks at working place, including accidents caused by work-related equipment and tools, inhaling dust and vapors, exposure to chemical products, constant sitting or standing up, etc. The following statistics have been concluded:

- Around 39% of the sample interviewed suffered from more than one health problem.
- Around 17% of the sample interviewed had chest problems.
- Around 15% of the sample suffered from some work-related injury.
- Around 5% of the sample interviewed suffered burns while working.
- Around 11% of the sample suffered from rheumatism.

The severity of these risks varies from one industrial sector to the other as well as the level of professional safety and working environment observed by the firm. Moreover, some industries by nature (especially the chemicals sector) do have specific work-related health problems such as gynecological problems, tumors, convulsions, ulcers. In general, the study concludes the existence of weak safety and security measures as well as a deteriorated working environment especially in the field of textiles in both private and public sectors and in the field of chemicals in the private sector. One of those responsible for safety and health in the workplace in the Suez Canal zone revealed that there is a state of conspiracy between the authorities in charge of monitoring the private sector and owners of the factories in the sense that they are informed in advance of the dates of inspection while these visits should take place by surprise. Although the employees in charge of these inspections have the right to enter these factories without prior authorization, they are most of the time prevented from doing this. In other governorates such as Alexandria, an employee responsible for health and security explained that in all cases the penalties for contraventions are very low and that the procedures of litigation are quite long when a worker takes proceedings against the employer for being exposed to work-related hazards.

3.7 In 2009, NWF has prepared a report about sexual harassment in the industrial zones that was conducted with a sample of 40 female workers from four governorates (Alexandria, Suez, Port-Said and Ismailiah). All those interviewed confirmed that sexual harassment occurs at the work place regardless the dress of the worker (either veiled or unveiled), her marital status or her age. Most cases of sexual harassment are perpetrated by colleagues, supervisors, or employers. Sexual harassment included improper touching of the body, either inside the factory or in the factory bus. Those interviewed also mentioned some forms of insults and humiliation, rude words, pornographic expressions, as well as improper behavior in open places and gardens (i.e., men exposing themselves), sexual assault (trying to kiss the worker), clear and direct sexual requests mainly based on the power relation between the requestor and the victim (namely a supervisor or an employer), and improper staring.

According to the case studies the main reasons behind the conduct of sexual harassment at the workplace are primarily related to the following factors:

- The low number of women working in night shifts;
- The proximity of work equipment that allow for supervisors to touch the bodies of female workers during work, specifically sensitive parts of their bodies as well as a

- possibility for any male worker to go near or under the machines under the pretext of fixing something;
- The fact that production floors are mixed with most supervisors being primarily men who possess authority over female workers;
 - The fact that bathrooms for both sexes are placed nearby (some workers explained that many toilets have no ceiling and walls are low which enable males to watch them while in the toilet room);
 - The absence of legal or trade unionist protection encourages supervisors and employers to sexually harass female workers without fearing any repercussion for their acts;
 - Factories do not provide safe means of transportation for those who work late at night. Moreover, over-crowded buses allow for sexual touching by "inadvertence";
 - The perception of female workers as inferior beings and the constant judging of their morals puts them in a position of vulnerability;
 - The prevailing culture of "blaming the victim" that condemns women subjected to sexual harassment prevents them complain;
 - The absence of a clear legal text that specifically considers sexual harassment at workplace as a crime worthy punishment.

3.8 On the other hand, sexual harassment at the workplace was initiated by the management of some factories during the past year against female leaders in the workers' strikes and protest movements in order to break their resistance through the violation of their body integrity. This was reported by two workers, Wedad Demerdash and Amal El Said, of the textile factory in Mehallah El Kobra who were sexually harassed, insulted, beaten, had their veil removed, and threatened with rape in front of their families on November 1st 2008 if they did not stop from participating in the protests with their colleagues. This also reportedly happened in other instances in the presence of security forces which was the case of the female workers of "El Hennawi" tobacco factory were 32 of them were dismissed for no reason except that they were calling for their rights.

3.9 Regarding the rights they enjoyed at work, it was found that 79% of those interviewed had never heard of the executive regulation of women's work where as a mere 17% claimed that this document was hanged on the wall at the workplace. Whenever faced with work-related problems, a very small percentage of female workers (2.33%) did file a complaint before the trade union committee of the factory, or go to the labor bureau (0.83%), while 10% claimed that they usually do not take the matter further. According to in-depth interviews conducted, this was mainly due to the fear of not only losing their current job, but also to the fear of losing other future work opportunities. They moreover claimed complaining could be translated into deprivation from promotion, cuts from the salary, or other forms of punishment.

4. Recommendations

- The Egyptian government should be held accountable for its grave violations of international commitments regarding human rights in general and women's rights in particular.
- The Egyptian government should adopt national laws compatible with its international commitments and obligations.
- The Egyptian government should allow and enable civil society organizations to play a monitoring and advocacy role.