

Country Report France for the World's Women Conference 2016: **On the situation and struggles of women in France**

This report was written by different women, mostly from the Association of Women of L'île-Saint-Denis near Paris, but other women also took part in it.

France is a European country in which nearly 66 million people live. It's the world's 6th largest economic power. Big international companies coming from France are established all over the world, such as companies from the car industry, aircraft manufacturing and nuclear, chemical and agricultural industry. Paris is the country's capital, where about 12 million people live.

Women played an important role in France's history throughout their many struggles, uprisings and revolutions ! During the French Revolution in 1789, 7000 women walked to the king's castle to protest. Olympe de Gouges published the «Declaration of the Rights of Women» in 1791. Women also took part in the 1840 and 1848 revolutions. Women's bravery on the barricades of the Paris Commune in 1871 is legendary. They were numerous as well as leaders of the struggle. Louise Michèle and Elisabeth Dmitrieff are still famous today. Women took part in all great social movements, in resisting against fascism, in great strikes, etc.

France is a «rich» country, but poverty exists and social inequalities are even increasing! Unemployment has been high for years and is increasing: currently the official unemployment rate is 11%, but the data doesn't reflect the whole problem. After Spain , France has the most unemployed youngsters: 20% approximately. The number of homeless people has increased by 50% in the last decade! Every year an average of 2000 people die on the streets in the winter or of diseases. 3.8 million people do not have decent lodging and every year almost 150 000 people are evicted from their homes because they cannot pay their rent. A winter truce forbids eviction during the cold season.

The law says men and women are equal and have the same rights. But that's not what it's like in real life...

Work: 65% of women between the age of 15 and 64 work, but it is mostly them who have the low-paid jobs and 80% of part-time jobs. It appears to some that women chose to work part-time, but often they have no choice. For most women it's a way to have a professional life as well as a family. Most women with a family have a **double day's work**, because they still do 80% of the housework.

In our society complex daily life is organized in a «private» way: we must solve the problems on our own, individually. And often that is simply impossible:

⑩ Every family has to cook its own meals, clean the clothes, help children with school problems, care for the sick members of the family, etc. Instead of all this being organized by society as a whole.

⑩ Unemployment and low wages - on the other hand, the never-ending temptation to consume, encouraged by advertising and loans.

⑩ Everyday illnesses (mental but also physical such as allergies) created by pollution and the destruction of our natural environment (noise, stress, lack of quiet and rest, the atmosphere in the suburbs with too much traffic, concrete and noise).

⑩ And happens if an accident occurs or a serious illness? If the child gets on badly in school? If the child starts taking drugs?

Family life on top of professional life exhausts us and requires all our energy to solve

problems created by first and foremost by society. The desire for a collective life with solidarity exists and comes to life more and more often: young women or families get organized to look after children, to give each other a hand or advice. There are tens of thousands of associations in France which exist to make common projects come to life. Sometimes these associations and organizations become our «second family».

This desire and our struggles lead to the creation of aid organizations such as nurseries, kindergartens, etc...The know-how exists to organize things otherwise. But all these plans and initiatives are not enough. But they show what a different society of solidarity could be. At the conference in Nepal a debate on this and how to get there seems necessary to us.

Wages and salaries: In France the minimum wage is 8.86 euros per hour. This is 1344 euros per month gross salary. However mini-part-time jobs and unemployment are the cause of a lot of poverty. Salaries are unequal according to gender: for the same job a woman's salary will be 19% less in average. One of the most important demands must be: Equality of men and women in professional work !

The legal retirement age is 62. For women minimum wage will be followed by a minimum pension: 60% of poor people are women, often also as a single-parent or at retirement age.

Inequalities and discrimination towards women lead to rebellion and struggles. Paris hotels chambermaids struggled admirably numerous times over the past few years for a pay rise, for better work conditions in face of work that is very harmful for their health and their dignity. Proletarian women, often with African origins, have organized themselves in the CGT union. Thanks to their strikes they won! Supported by many activists, they reminded everyone that the price of some rooms in “their hotels”, with up to 16,000 euros per night, is sometimes more than their yearly income.

The **population** in France is increasing because it has the highest birth rate in Europe with 2.1 children per woman: maternity leave is 16 weeks. Nurseries start in the 6th week and kindergartens at 2 years of age, and they are free for the lowest incomes. The price depends on income. However, the number of places in day care is insufficient and one must often wait.

Social insurance guarantees income in case of unemployment, illness or retirement, but these achievements are under attack and private insurance – if you can pay for it - has to take over more and more of the costs.

Violence against women is a social issue in France.

Marital abuse: in 2 years 400 000 women have claimed to be victims. 1 woman out of 10 is a victim of marital abuse. One woman dies every three days because of her partner's violence; thousands of rapes are carried out every year and it's estimated that only one woman out of 10 victims «dares» report it.

Laws on this were improved in the last years. Psychological violence towards these women is also considered as a crime and forces the partner to leave his home. In the Parisian area, a Departmental Observatory on violence against women has been created. Steps have been taken to protect, inform, raise awareness and help women.-- Instead of being helped, many women are not considered as victims, but as being responsible for the marital abuse. It is made difficult for them to be understood and to defend themselves.

Where does this violence come from? Is it a question of “men” or of “women”? Does violence not have it's roots in chauvinist and paternalistic attitudes and traditions, as well as in society's current system which is violent. Women are the first victims of a patriarchal system which exists universally.

Violence has many faces: It can also be economical and social (prostitution). The

understanding and the core of the problem must be revealed and denounced in order to find real solutions, because the problem persists.

Also sexism in advertisements, mass media and fashion deform women and should be regarded as violence. Sexism imposes a picture of "femininity" upon us which is based on seduction.

The right termination of pregnancy (abortion) is a fundamental gain in the history of our struggles for emancipation. The government has recently set up a free and anonymous phone number accessible to everyone to make access to abortion easier for women in need. On the other hand, some abortion clinics are threatened in their existence because of a lack of funds. There aren't enough clinics and health-care centers to carry out abortions within the legal time limits.

France was on the front page of many newspapers worldwide following the Daesh attacks led in January and November 2015. After the murderous attack upon the editorial office of the satirical newspaper «Charlie Hebdo», 4 million people demonstrated to defend freedom of expression and against fascist terror. After the November attacks, the «state of emergency» was declared by the government and has been continuing for months. The constraint of democratic and individual freedom by this state of emergency is denounced not only by activists, but also by lawyers, judges, etc. During the UN Climate Conference in December 2015, the state of emergency was clearly a way to muzzle protests. But the environmentalist movement still organized actions and demonstrations. Women and their organizations protested in great numbers against the destruction of **natural environment**. Women are the first victims of the climate change. For a long time women have become more aware and are challenged through the increase of allergies and diseases in the families. Women were mobilized by the actions during the UN Climate Conference.

France is at war in 7 countries and the government justifies these military interventions with the anti-terror struggle. Daesh must be fought militarily, however there is a debate about the reasons for these interventions in our country: some people in France are for the withdrawal of French troops, others aren't. Are imperialist motives not also reasons for these interventions? Peoples and women in wars should be matter of discussion at the conference in Nepal. Rape as a weapon of war must be denounced, as well as sex slavery in countries at war.

The current social-democratic government and its president Hollande are leading an antipopular policy in favor of big industrial companies - just like the previous Sarkozy government.

Nevertheless the government did carry out some reforms favorable to women:

- ⑩ the creation of a High Council for the Equality of Men and Women
- ⑩ fight against discrimination and inequality on the job
- ⑩ school programs to raise awareness against stereotypes and discrimination.
- ⑩ In health questions: abortion is reimbursed to 100% to all women covered by social insurance. A free phone number to call for help.
- ⑩ 100% of the costs for the anti-baby pill for girls and youth starting at age 15. Free morning-after pills at chemists have existed for a few years.
- ⑩ In the fight against violence against women a law was passed in 2010 and was improved in 2015 to protect women against marital violence and violent partners; alert cell phone for all women in danger and creation of places of accommodation (there are still not

enough).

- ⑩ National program to fight harassment and sexual violence in public transport
- ⑩ Campaign against forced marriages
- ⑩ Gay marriage has been legal since 2014, which is a bit later than neighboring countries. However assisted reproduction is still not allowed for lesbian couples.

Struggle against prostitution

90% of all prostitutes in France are women of immigrant origin (according to the Association 'Cimade').

In February 2016 a new law was passed that lifts the stipulation that prostitution (punter advertising) is a criminal offense. It provides a) a temporary residence permit for 1 year and work permit for foreign victims of trafficking and prostitution who begin to leave prostitution.

b) punishment of the punters with 1,500 euros and more for purchasing the sexual act. The latter has caused a big controversy. A number of people ask whether this promise protects prostitutes or worsens their situation. The latter view is partly mixed with a different point of view that wants to legalize prostitution and regard it as "work like any other". The women's movement in France is divided in this point.

All these rights and laws are the fruit of our struggle and the women's movement in France is alive and militant. However, the signal effect of the reform is not enough. The achievement must go hand in hand with providing financial and human resources. We are currently witnessing a revival of the women's movement in France: many women's groups are committed to women's rights. On 8 March and 25 November, the day against violence against women, and in actions of the International Women March the various initiatives come together.

Immigration:

More and more immigrants are fleeing to France from the former colonies of France and from other countries because of bad living conditions, the environmental crisis and wars. Among them are many women. The refugees are received badly by the authorities. Some work secretly as undocumented immigrants. Hundreds of refugees live in inhuman situations in forests, in camps or along highways.

Migrant women are the most vulnerable group of women. We demand the recognition of their work and their legalization. Recently about 10 000 people participated in a "march for dignity" in Paris. The hairdressers from Strasbourg-Saint-Denis Boulevard have fought for months for their regularization. The government did not hesitate to expel tens of thousands of immigrants in recent years. Regularly Roma camps are dismantled. We accuse the European Union of letting the Mediterranean Sea become a death trap for thousands of men, women and children for many years! Right-wing political movements such as the National Front are trying to take advantage of the situation in order to divide us. But immigrants are not responsible for the social and political crisis, they are its victims!

Every year on the anniversary we protest against the murder of the three Kurdish activists Sakine, Leyla and Fidan in Paris as they fought for the freedom of their people and the rights of women. Who are the persons behind this crime? Until now, the answer remains unclear. The imperialist interests of France and Turkey prevent the crime from been solved. We demand the truth and the punishment of those who are responsible! The struggle of women and men in Rojava for the freedom of their people also obtained a

lot of solidarity in France: a collective called "Feminist solidarity with the women of Kobane" sent a delegation to the region in order to make their courageous struggle known in France. After the victory of the people of Kobane the collective will now contribute to the rebuilding of the city with a "house of women" and collects money for that.

Women from France participated with a delegation at the first World Conference of grassroots women in Venezuela. Since this conference in Caracas, women from France have always participated at the Continental Conferences in Europe every year. At the European Conference we started to get to know each other and to create a network of solidarity and struggle. The conditions to initiate actions and campaigns at a European level that can reach a wider audience are beginning to develop.

In Europe we protested against the project of the European Union to reduce the subsidies for poor people, and we have helped in getting these plans canceled. After the disaster in 2012 in the textile factory Rana Plaza/Bangladesh we mobilized against the contractors in France. We contributed to the "solidarity trucks" with packages for families in Greece, collected donations for our sisters in Nepal after the 2015 earthquake. In all these years, in our thoughts, our hearts and in our actions, we were with the struggles of the men and women in Rojava, as well as in Palestine.

The World Conference of grassroots women sensitized and stimulated us. It has organized these actions and has made us stronger: "women of the world – let us fight together. Organized we are invincible!"