

**A Woman worth A Hundred Women**

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**Introduction**

This booklet documents the success stories of ten women who had leadership roles in defending women's labour rights and their rights to trade union organization. Their roles were motivating and inspiring for their female and male co-workers.

We are trying through this booklet to contribute to improving the image of women through highlighting a different image, and highlighting their capacities to change and resist the violence and discrimination they are subjected to in work. We were keen to show diverse experiences from different work areas and various governorates.

These are live testimonies narrated by the women themselves. They were drafted with the same phrases and spoken words in order to convey their realities and experiences the way they narrate them. We seek to disseminate these testimonies and success stories on a wide scale in order to highlight the role of these female leaders, and to document these experiences that can be inspiring for other female trade unionists in order to exchange experiences among the female trade unionists.

This booklet is one of the activities of "Women in Work: Tools to Empower Egyptian Women Workers" project which has been implemented in collaboration with the Dutch embassy in Cairo for two years. Most of these women have participated in the project's activities that varied to include training activities, seminars, workshops and launching campaigns and initiatives concerned with women's labour issues.

1.

The story begins with protests concerned with their demands within the governorate. Then they moved to Cairo defying people's talk and their conservative reality in order to defend their rights. Their struggle continued until victory has been achieved.

### **The Origin of the Story..**

The number of the female rural pioneers ranges from 4000 to 5000 all over Egypt. The National Population Council hired them at the beginning to raise awareness of the population problem then they were officially affiliated with the Ministry of Health under new temporary contracts of three months duration. They were hired according to the fourth section of the wages system in 2010. Much to our surprise, the Ministry of Health discharged a large number of the experienced female pioneers and contracted with new pioneers under annual contracts. The old female pioneers remained with the 3-months temporary contracts.

### **We Have to Take an Action..**

Samia Ahmed is a female rural pioneer in Asyut. She had a great leadership role in defending the rights of the female rural pioneers in order to enable them to achieve their rights.

“It was impossible for us to give up while our rights were being taken away from us and all our working years were being wasted. I started to talk with my female colleagues in Asyut that we have to take an action.”

“Convincing my female colleagues to organize a sit-in to claim our rights was not an easy task at all as the social norms and traditions promote that women's participation in sit-ins or protests will expose them to problems. However, 32 female colleagues were motivated through discussions. We went to the Directorate of Health and we organized a stand-in protest in July 2010. The result was that the security forces surrounded us and we were threatened. I was afraid that what happened would reduce our determination. Then January revolution took place and it was a great reason to stimulate my female colleagues to move forward especially while experiencing disregard and underestimation from the administration. During 2011, we escalated our movement and protests more than once in front of the parliament and Ministry of Health. We managed to reach out to female colleagues from other governorates.”

### **And We Succeeded..**

After the escalated protests of the female rural pioneers in different governorates to demand better wages and permanent appointment, they have actually succeeded to be present continuously in front of the governmental bodies and to make the issue remain on the table.

“A delegation of our group managed to meet with the former Prime Minister EssamSharaf and the former Head of Central Agency for Organization and Administration Safwat El-Nahas”, Samia added. “Safwat El Nahas said that he signed employment contracts for us in 2005 but the government did not acknowledge the appointment decision. During the meeting, we demanded the formation of a joint committee made up of the governor and the undersecretary of the head of Central Agency for Organization and Administration. Four sessions were held. On 23<sup>rd</sup> of April 2013, the decision was made to re-employ us and to sign employment contracts according to the first section of the system of wages. We were appointed after couple of months under permanent employment contracts. The main actors of success of the battle we have won were the collective work and the organization of our action. Thus, we realized the importance of organization and the establishment of trade union.”

2.

Effat Abdel Razek swam against the tide. Demanding and defending the rights of her colleagues was her main goal.

“I have been working in a hospital since 1990. Over the last few years, we started to experience problems related to low wages that ranged before 2011 from 200 to 250 pounds per month, in addition to a monthly bonus of 30% from which 20%-25% is deducted. After January revolution, specifically on 13<sup>th</sup> of March 2011, we organized a stand-in protest demanding increase in wages and the entitlement of vacation balance according to the Labour Law No.12. The salaries were increased from 250 pounds to 400 pounds per month. As for the vacation balance, it was cleared from 2006 to 2009. We pressured the board of directors to approve our right to have our vacation balance starting from the date of our appointment. The decision was in favor of our rights; it approved our right to have the vacation balance and we received the due amounts in full.”

### **The Collective Work..**

This experience was an important step for the male and female workers inside the hospital. It was a result of having a joint goal and cooperation to achieve a joint interest.

“The practical experience allowed us to know the importance of the collective work and organizing ourselves within an entity through which we can defend our demands. We completed the procedures and on 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2011 we succeeded in establishing a trade union. I was elected as the vice president of the union. We contacted the administration of the hospital through an official letter stating the need to form board of directors to represent the trade union in the board. But, the administration did not acknowledge the trade union in the first place. Whenever a problem happens and I raise it to the administration, I find no response. I was subjected to threats of dismissal but I held onto my right in practicing my trade union role and defending the rights of my male and female colleagues who voted for me. They entrusted me to express their demands to improve wages, to defend their right to having nurseries in workplace and to respond to any abuse from the administration.”

“I was also keen to provide opportunities for new leaders among my female colleagues to get engaged in trade union work. I was encouraging them to attend training workshops through which we learned the mechanism of positive discrimination and that we can allocate seats for women “Quota”. In the trade union, I raised the issue of amending the regulations to allocate a minimum of 25 % of the seats of the board for women. Through

discussions with my female colleagues, we succeeded in convincing them and we conducted an amendment to the regulations.”

**Hold onto the Rights..**

“The administration of the hospital tried through pressure and intimidation to take arbitrary procedures against me to force me to stop my trade union work. In 2014, I was fired from work. I resorted to proceedings and I filed a lawsuit to the court against the arbitrary administrative procedures of the hospital. On 14<sup>th</sup> of January 2015 (after more than a year), the court ruling approved my right to return back to work, but the ruling has not been executed up till now. Nevertheless, I will continue the procedures until I gain my rights back.”

3.

Like any ambitious young girl, AbeerAshour graduated from the university hoping to have a suitable job opportunity. However, like many others, Abeer had to accept a job not related to her major which is working as a “bread seller” in the bakeries project in Suez governorate.

### **We Will Not Remain Silent..**

“My salary was 256 EGP. In mid-2010, employment contracts were made for us according to the Labour Law no.12. I suggested to my colleagues that we go to the social insurance body to make sure that we have social insurance. I found what I was expecting indeed, the Social Security contributions were not paid by the employer. We lodged a complaint to the local council that the bakery is affiliated with. I started to encourage my female colleagues to hold onto our right in applying the social security system. We succeeded to gain back our right to social and health insurance. This was how we started to think of the importance of having a trade union. We formed the first trade union for female workers in bread distribution outlets in Egypt and I was elected as the head of the union.”

### **Living Needs Freedom..**

“The administration’s response was very tough. Some female workers were dismissed under the pretext of absence; although there was no system for attendance and leave or even a system through which we can prove our commitment to working hours. I organized with female workers a stand-in protest because other female workers have received new machines to make bread and we were asked to distribute the breads and bear the deficit and the leftover. They started to threaten the female workers with dismissal and imprisonment. The threats reached their husbands; in order to stop any action was being done by the female workers to defend their rights. Moreover, I have experienced defamation and they incited thugs to attack me in order to silence me and to stop me from defending the female workers’ rights. But I refused to remain silent and I lodged a complaint to the concerned administrative bodies and the investigation was carried out.”

Abeer was oppressed in work. On 10<sup>th</sup> of June, she was dismissed because she practices trade union work and defends the rights of her female colleagues. Abeer has lodged a complaint to the governor and the head of the local council. The decision was issued approving her return to work in August 2014. AbeerAshour confirms that the laws

concerned with the punishment of employers who violate the workers' rights aren't activated.

“In spite of all this, we will continue to defend our rights at work by uniting our goals and our demands until we gain back all of them”, she concluded.

4.

Amid the traffic jam of the city and the noisy horns of the cars, Nour sits in the driving seat when someone waves to her. He steps in and is surprised that the taxi driver is a woman.

“My name is NourGaber and I work as a taxi driver. I did not plan for this of course. My story began when I traveled to Dubai to work there. I met my husband, we got married and I gave birth to one boy and two girls. Then my husband experienced problems in his job and I helped him. I then found out that he took all the money and he left me and my children. I decided to return back to Egypt and look for a job we can live on its salary. Some people advised me to buy a taxi and run it but I found out that the taxi drivers I hired were deceiving me. One day, they do not give me the income. The other day, they tell me that there is a failure in the car. Then one day, they came back with a complete damage in the car. I went on my way to fix it. On the way, I found someone waving to me and asking me to drop him off to a certain place. I found myself telling him to step in and he was the first passenger. I thought to myself then why not to drive the taxi myself and indeed since 2009 this has become my main profession.”

### **People’s Gossip.**

“Of course I faced many problems because of the decision I made. My siblings argued with me. I used to park the taxi away from my house. When I go to my children at school, I park the car away from the school because my son was annoyed and afraid that his friends would offend him. Not to mention the talk I used to hear from the male taxi drivers, such as “You will share us in driving taxis too?” “What forced you on this job?” However, people started to accept it bit by bit. One day, my son was in a taxi and the taxi driver learned that his mother works as a taxi driver. The driver said to my son: “Your mother is a great person. You should be proud of her”. The drivers became my colleagues. I have now clients who entrust to me their children and send me to welcome their foreign guests at the airport because I can speak English.”

### **Nour’s dreams..**

Nour’s passion did not stop by only proving that the jobs which the society restricted to be occupied by men only can be done by women too. Nour’s dreams aren’t limited to only this. She dreams to carry out a non-profit project that targets women You will share us in driving taxis too breadwinner; divorced women or widows who are looking for a door of

livelihood. Nour plans that the project will be based on teaching these women driving and communication skills, as well as teaching them English language so that they do not find difficulty in dealing with foreign passengers. She will support them until they receive a driving license and can practice the job.

“Many women will benefit from this project”, Nour says. “They will be able to improve their income for their families. Many families will entrust their sons and daughters to them. I aim by this project to contribute to empowering women to prove practically that women are equal to men”.

5.

“My engagement in trade union work opened up new avenues for me and areas of professional and trade union development”

### **Persistent..**

Ghada Attia is a female teacher. She is 37 years old. She holds the position of Assistant Secretary of Teachers Independent Trade Union and the Assistant Secretary of the Regional Federation of the Independent Trade Unions in Al-Sharqiya governorate.

“I started to get engaged in the trade union work when I participated in a stand-in protest held by the teachers and workers in the Ministry of Education to express our demands. I met my colleagues in the trade union in this protest. I started to get acquainted with the role of the trade union and what it can provide. I joined the trade union back then. I focused my efforts on the trade union work and on how I can defend the rights of male and female workers through this role. I ran for the elections of the trade union and won the position of Assistant Secretary of the union. We, as a union, joined the Regional Federation of Independent Trade Unions in Al-Sharqiya governorate in July 2014. The Union Executive Board included at that time one woman only. I suggested to my colleagues that we attend workshops to know more about women’s labour rights. Through these workshops, we learned about the "Quota" which is considered a positive discrimination to ensure women’s rights. Getting to know the rights was the beginning. I discussed with my female colleagues that we should make a good use of the Quota system. We raised a draft resolution to be presented to the General Assembly in September 2014. We have succeeded in changing the regulations and we ran for the elections. Women won with a high percentage the position of Secretary-General of the Committee on Women, Youth Committee and the International Relations Committee. Then we attended workshops on the amendments to the Labour Law No. 12 of 2003. We carried out awareness campaigns in schools titled “Committing Employers to Provide Nurseries in Workplace”. Many female teachers interacted with the campaign in various schools. The trade union work indeed encouraged me and expanded my areas of interest in labor rights and in the engagement in trade union activities such as coordinating between trade unions on the issue of Civil Service Law no.18 Of 2015.”

“I still have a great passion to work on labour issues. I was honoured by the Ministry of Education two times for a project titled “The quality of Community Education.”

6.

Ensuring care and comfort for patients is a work that deserves to be appreciated. However, what happens in hospitals is just the opposite. There are violations of the rights of the nursing profession. Not to mention the perception of inferiority that pursues the nurses.

### **We Are All One..**

“I am Hala. In 1989, I finished nursing diploma and I worked in Al Haram hospital affiliated with the Therapeutic Institution. I defended the rights of my female and male colleagues to receive a health care in the hospital. We established an independent trade union for the workers in Al Haram hospital to raise our problems to the board of directors and to unite our voice.”

### **We Have the Right to Having a Nursery for Our Children..**

“One of our main demands was a nursery for our children, because most of us work different shifts. We had no place where we can leave our children. We collected signatures of male and female workers and we filed a request to the director of the hospital. He told us that there is no item in the financial budget to implement this. We checked the budget and found an item for donations which can be used. A room was allocated to be used as a nursery. We prepared it with self-effort; we used old furniture after repairing it and the nursery was run.”

### **Nothing Is Impossible..**

The success of Hala and her colleagues continued with demanding the administration to provide another room for the nursery when they figured out that there is difference in the ages of the children. They distributed the children over two stages according to their age. Hence, there were two classes of the nursery in the hospital.

“Of course, our success in establishing the nursery has boosted our self-confidence and has boosted also my colleagues’ trust in me as I am one of the people who had a key role in this initiative. This encouraged us to proceed in taking actions and creating pressures to achieve the rest of our demands”, Hala adds.

7.

We cannot continue to remain silent on women's labour rights especially the rights related to the reproductive role; including the provision of nurseries. This is not only a women's responsibility but also a societal responsibility (of the state, the work institutions and the family).

### **It's My Right to Make Sure That My Children Are Safe..**

“I am Abeer. I have been working since 1987 in the Chest Diseases Hospital in Mahalla governorate. We did not have nurseries in the workplace back then. It was a daily suffering for the workers who were looking for nurseries or leaving their children with relatives. All of this causes burden, psychological consequences and physical effort.”

“When we started to get to know our rights and to organize ourselves within trade unions, we discussed the need to take the initiative of providing nurseries. We started with some procedures and we managed to allocate three rooms in a separate place from the hospital. We collected money with self-efforts from doctors and nurses to prepare the place so that it becomes eligible to receive the children. Much to our surprise, the administration refused. The hospital director said: “How can you collect money yourselves?” We said that it is okay for us to pay money in order to have our children near us. He told us that this is illegal and that we should register with the Social Affairs body. We indeed filed an application to the concerned social affairs office, we registered and a date was specified for the examination of the building. They expressed a preliminary approval of the place and informed us that we can run the nursery until the extraction of the necessary permit is done because the process takes a long time. Much to our surprise, the director refused again. We raised the issue within the trade union and we agreed on contacting the administration of the hospital. We contacted them three times but we did not receive any response.”

“One of the factors that motivated us was the communication with other trade unions and outputting the campaign titled “Committing employers to provide nurseries in the workplace”. We worked within the campaign; we participated in launching the campaign's statement and we presented our experience. We spoke out about the problems we were subjected to and about the administration that insists on violating our rights. We raised our voice through the campaign to the media.”

### **We Will Not Give Up..**

“We activated the campaign within the hospital and we worked on collecting signatures in support of the campaign. We organized a seminar within the hospital to get the female colleagues acquainted with their rights. The Secretary-General of the trade union and the administration of the hospital were invited. We managed to engage male colleagues in the issue”, Abeer says. “We will not give up until we establish the nursery because this is part of our rights. We should succeed in convincing the director of the hospital with the need and importance of providing nursery in workplace. Mothers have the right to make sure their children are safe because it is not good for work efficiency that mothers worry for their children.”

8.

It is one of the companies established in the sixties to support the Egyptian industry. Telemasr Company was founded in 1962, specialized in the industry of radios and televisions that were among the main domestic appliances in Egypt. The product line was extended to include the rest of the domestic appliances. However, like any private foundation, it was interspersed with problems and obstacles where the rights of male and female workers- who are always seeking to improve the company's production- might be lost.

### **Turning Point..**

“I am Karima. I work in Telemasr Company. The company’s condition was going very well and there was no loss. The story begins when Mr.HeshamElghazawi, the owner of the biggest share of the company’s stocks, started to procrastinate in paying the dues of the male and female workers. He put pressure on them to leave the company, because he wanted to sell off the company and turn it to commercial estate projects, although he was the reason for the company’s loss of big amounts during the past years.”

### **Continuous Violations..**

“We were surprised to know that he requested the General Union and the Ministry of Manpower a partial closure of the company. The ministry refused. He decided to overstrain the workers in different forms such as increasing the working hours without paying social allowance, and stopping the work of the busses of the company. He ended the contracts with the hospitals that work with the company. He postponed paying the salaries and he deprived us of all the allowances, bonuses and incentives.”

### **There Is a Limit for Injustice..**

“We organized stand-in protests. We filed our demands to the trade union. The result was my dismissal from work because I practice my trade union role of defending the rights of male and female workers. In June 2011, Elghazawi requested the Ministry of Manpower the layoff of 80 workers under the pretext that the company does not need them. We organized a stand-in protest at the Attorney General office and we demanded the return of the laid-off workers who suffered arbitrary dismissal. We demanded the return of the

agreements with hospitals and doctors as well. He put pressure on us to leave the job. He dismissed me. I filed a lawsuit and I returned back to work. I was not the only one; he put pressure on my female colleagues who were taking action with me. Then suddenly, he transferred us arbitrarily to the company branch in Ismailia. We used to leave home at 6 a.m. and come back at 9 p.m. It was a hard effort and it affected our performance in work. This of course was a way to put pressure on us and to tell us that nobody can stand up to him because he was counting on the fact that this situation will cause a disruption for the workers in their living. Nevertheless, we did not surrender.”

A lawsuit was filed to prove the arbitrary transfer, thus, they returned back to Cairo. This was a result of their persistence and their determination to regain back their rights at work.

9.

The heroine of our story is a persistent and determined woman. She has been working hard for 37 years in “Al-Nasr Company for Civil Works”. She completed her studies in order to have the opportunity for professional development and improvement of functional status.

### **The Determination and Persistence..**

Fatma has been working in the company since 1975 with the qualification of Diploma of Commerce. Fatma begins her story and says “I have been working in the company for 37 years. I joined the university. I improved my qualification and completed the bachelor of commerce from Faculty of Commerce Cairo University. I was appointed with the degree of "Excellent Accountant". I joined the trade union within the company. I started to experience pressures in work when the members of the trade union committee filed a request to the company’s administration to make permanent employment contracts for the temporary employment and to promote some of the workers to higher degrees according to the law, as well as to rerun the busses for the transportation of the company’s workers. However, the request was dismissed under the pretext that the busses are for sale. It was decided to pay 50 pounds monthly as a transportation allowance for the workers; this was a small part of the actual cost of the transportation for sure.”

“We were surprised to find cuts in the social allowances approved by the state. The trade union informed the company’s chairman that the workers refuse this action and that he should go back on his decision but he did not respond.”

“The workers had no choice but to protest and demand the resignation of the chairman because he did not commit to the regulations or to any agreement signed between us. The workers organized a stand-in protest in 2011 and they committed the employer to sign an agreement to protect the workers’ rights. However, this paper was not activated.”

“In May 2012, he reported us to the police. Eighteen workers and trade unionists were arrested. He filed a report and accused them of inciting workers to refrain from

performing their work. They were detained for one night, including the head of the union. The case was referred and the court ruling cleared them of all charges in January 2013.”

### **It’s My Right and I Will Gain it Back..**

“When I was 60 years old and while I was completing the papers of end-of-service benefits, I was surprised by the stubbornness of the head of the company. He deprived me of all dues claiming that I am referred with some members of the union committee to the Administrative Prosecution in the same suit of incitement which was in 2012. All this happened because I decided to defend the workers’ rights someday.”

Fatma lodged complaints to all the concerned bodies starting from the trade union and her managers up to the Minister of Manpower, Minister of Investment and Industry, Minister of Justice, the Attorney General and Minister of Defense. However, Fatma did not receive her dues until she filed a lawsuit against the company with the number 21d/2014. In May, the complaint -which was filed against Fatma in the Administrative Prosecution - was lifted.

“I will continue to file complaints until I gain back my rights”, Fatma confirms.

10.

She is a helpful trade unionist. Her passion did not stop at being elected to be the head of the union but she seeks to establish the basics of trade union work and teamwork. She struggles to make the trade union carry out its basic and fundamental role of defending the rights of its members.

**There Must Be an Entity to Bring Us Together..**

“I am Fatma. I was appointed in the sales tax authority. The problem started when around 1500 employees were transferred to the general taxes department. I was not among them but we did not accept this for our colleagues especially that the number was not small and the work environment there was different. There was no entity to defend the rights of these male and female employees except the financial committee; it is a committee concerned with the customs, finance and general taxes. We went to the chairman of the committee and talked with him. He said “We cannot do anything. You need a decision from the parliament.” We formed a committee in agreement to defend the rights of the workers in the sales tax authority. We did not know back then what is a trade union, what the trade union’s roles are or how it can be formed. We filed a lawsuit and we won it. We found out that this committee does not have any power, authority or legal basis.”

“We started to ask our colleagues and we consulted experienced people. They told us how we can establish a trade union and demand our rights through it. We started with the proceedings. In May 2011, we established the union. The first board was established in agreement and its round was one year. We started to raise our issues; the same issues which were the reasons for us to hold our stand-in protest in March 2011 demanding the improvement of our financial situations and canceling job extension after 60 because this deprives many employees of promotion and consequently there are no equal opportunities.”

“We, as a union, demanded the abolition of the tax on the earnings applied on the special bonuses according to the court ruling issued in March 2013 and which was not executed.

We also demanded improving the health care and increasing the transportation allowances to fit the continuous rise in prices.”

“The result was that we were suspended from work for three months without any investigation. Our salaries were suspended as well. We consulted human rights organizations asking them to give us advice. We filed a complaint to the concerned bodies and we held an open sit-in. We experienced pressures and threats to end our movement. The suspension was extended for three more months. We brought a letter from the court to receive our salaries until the investigation is completed. The concerned body refused. When I was talking to express my opinion, they replied “Why are you talking? Don’t you have a man in the trade union?” ”

“I worked hard and proved myself worthy of it until I was able to convince my male and female colleagues. I was nominated as the head of the union. I worked on the amendments to the regulations and I drafted a new model. We collected signatures and we held the General Assembly meeting in October 2013. I was elected as the head of the union. ”

“Since my election, I am keen to focus on my work and not to give way to any obstacles I encountered. I was always confident that my success in the trade union management and my cooperation with my colleagues will boost their trust in me and will eliminate any doubts and questions about my capacities. ”

Fatma succeeded through the collective management of the trade union in solving most of the problems of workers in the tax authority. The trade union has a joint active role with other trade unions to counter the Civil Service Law No. 18.

Fatma concludes by emphasizing on the political participation right of women in parliament and local councils and their rights to social protection without gender-based discrimination.