

March 8, 2013 International Women's Day:

The ITUC pays tribute to all women's rights activists

To all those women, risking imprisonment, torture, and even death just because they defend women's rights, to all those women taking a stand for a living wage or a workplace free of violence, to all those women making painful sacrifices for the sake of a society with fair relationships between women and men, to all of them, the ITUC says: thank you!.

On the occasion of this International Women's Day, the ITUC pays tribute to all women's rights defenders who are at the frontline of the struggle for gender equality, democracy, social justice and peace building. Their courage and determination deserve respect and solidarity.

Across the globe, countless female activists speak up, take actions and organise themselves and others to make this world a better place for women. They are trade unionists fighting for labour rights, mothers demanding gender justice for their daughters, wives and sisters responding to gender-based violence or community activists speaking up in defence of land, water and shelter. By challenging unequal gender relations, many of these women become targets of male violence.

The Arab region is a case in point. The activism of women in the lead up and aftermath of the Arab Spring has taken feminism to a new sphere. From Tunisia to Yemen and Egypt, women activists (whether journalists, bloggers, politicians, community organisers, union leaders or simple protestors) - have been unique in linking-up the demands for women's rights to the ones for social justice and democracy. Their refusal to be cowed, their unshakeable self-confidence and their determination to continue the struggle despite the dangers are remarkable. Sadly, dozens have been tortured, arrested, tried summarily in military courts, raped, imprisoned or in the case of Egypt, submitted to the so-called "virginity-tests" – the army's latest sexual tactic against female protestors.

Likewise, in the ex-soviet bloc, feminist activists refuse to consider women's rights as a separate issue from other human rights. While many of their demands relate to the elimination of women's sexual exploitation, they have focused their protests against autocratic political leaderships and religious institutions. Several activists, famous for their topless stunts around the world, have been arrested, received death threats and been mistreated. The severity of the sentence in the Pussy Riot case is an illustration of the repression.

Mexico and Central America is another region particularly dangerous for women activists. The increased militarisation of the region coincides with an increased

number of women's rights defenders being killed. The so-called war on drugs which was supposed to bring security to the people has often meant more weapons and less justice. It is estimated that over 30 women's rights defenders have been murdered for their activism over the last couple of years in the region and many more are subjected to illegal arrests, cruel and inhumane treatment, defamation campaigns or criminalisation. Women unionists trying to organise workers in export processing zones are among the first to be targeted.

In Turkey, 9 women activists from the national trade union centre KESK have spent almost a year in custody. They have been released recently pending trial. They have been accused of mobilising their membership for the defence of women's rights, in a country where the level of gender-based violence is the leading cause of death for women aged between 15 and 44. Over the last decade sex crimes have increased by 400% in Turkey. The results of the recent measures taken by the government remain to be seen.

Finally, the ITUC pays a special tribute to Malala Yousafza, an incredibly courageous 15 year old Pakistani girl. Malala was shot in the head on October 2012 by a Taliban because of her relentless advocacy for girls' right to education. Truly, an educated female population is a bigger threat to the Taliban than the best-trained army! Luckily Malala survived the attack and so will her fight for universal education in Pakistan.

The ITUC urges the international community and national authorities to recognise the specific vulnerability of women's rights defenders and to provide the necessary protection and space they need to build a healthy society.

The ITUC urges the 57th UN Commission on the Status of Women to send a strong message on government's responsibility to eliminate violence against women and girls.

See the ITUC Blog at the 57th UNCSW at: <http://unioncsw.worldpsi.org/> and Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/274122379324414/>

See the ITUC - PSI – EI Statement to the 57th UNCSW: http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/uncsw_57_statement_final_with_logos.pdf

See the Equal Times report on violence against women: <http://www.equaltimes.org/report/violence-against-women-the-global-fightback>