



## **Making Women Visible**

**Women's Trade Union Solidarity project, Palestine, March 2018.  
Women's Department, Trade Union Section, Palestine Committee of Norway.**

**Palestine Committee of Norway  
Women's Department  
Women's Trade Union Solidarity  
Workers change the world العمال يغيرون العالم**



## **Making Women Visible, sharing a story about struggle, courage, women's self-reliance and reciprocity, and trade union solidarity across borders.**



### **To build something from nothing**

"Can't we do anything together with this women's group?" asked Anne. She had met Women's Department in the union New Union (NU) in Tulkarem on the trade union solidarity visit in March 2017 and was very impressed by them. We considered this proposal. We decided to go for it and see what we could achieve.

Then a laborious, but very exciting process began, and eventually we could call it a project. The project was dug up from nothing, stamped from the ground. But we were not totally empty-handed. We had contact with female union activists in Palestine. We had the knowledge and experience of driving women's self-relying courses, both in Norway and elsewhere around the world, and we had a relatively useful overview of the trade union situation in the West Bank. To run the project forwards, we established a working group of eight, with the four female members of the TU Section and four interested from outside.

### **What should be our goal?**

From previous discussions we already had established: Our projects must be a two-sided solidarity project. Solidarity must be built, both in Palestine and at home. By that we mean that it should be based on reciprocity and cooperation between two equal parties and that knowledge must go both ways. That means acknowledging that there are many things we can learn from Palestinian unions. We must not act as judges and apply them to our thinking and union practice, but our contributions we must be on their premises, adjusted to their situation. On this basis we chose a few sentences to pinpoint and clarify the general principles: We will build trade union women's solidarity across national borders and we will help build strong union women's organization in Palestine by giving women attention, making women visible, encouraging to assert them and take the floor.

### **We start digging.**

The planning process started already in the summer of 2017. Basically, we wished to cooperate with several other organizations in addition to New Unions. We wanted to run a common course with different labor movements as participants, but this turned out to be virtually impossible to achieve without having been in touch with them in advance. In addition, there are strong contradictions between the different movements. Palestinian trade union movement consists of numerous organizations and is splitted and fractional, not easy to outline, or understand. Talking about unity and cooperation with them is like touching a gun-barrel. And so it turned out, that's what we experienced. In the fall, corruption cases and public prosecutions against PGFTU leadership also occurred, which did not make cooperative relations within the trade union movement in Palestine easier.

Therefore, we had to build on the contacts we had already worked on. The benefit of NU: We know them, they know us. They know what we stand for. Since 2012, we have built up mutual knowledge and trust through regular contact. This proves to be an incredibly important and crucial point when it comes to run any kind of successful project in Palestine. Other important characteristics of the NU are that they represent the working class, real workers. They have a basic plan, they define themselves as a grassroots organization, they are not just an organization with pampering, and they have a women's program, with the goal of 20% women in all boards. Four women are in the central management. See NU's Women's Program: "A Woman's Place is in her union" <https://www.stophewall.org/2017/04/23/woman-s-place-her-union>

But we have not given up the thought of recruiting other organizations, and hope for easier access at a later stage, when we have worked out a summary of this course for spreading and information to others.

### **The project takes shape.**

Then a very exciting development started. There were some difficulties and obstacles we had to overcome. Firstly, there are language problems. Very few Palestinian union members, especially on the ground level, speak or write English. But we had an ally and an invaluable partner in Palestine: Lama Yahya, PACE, Ramallah. She served as a necessary intermediary. We developed the concept in collaboration and discussions with her throughout the fall and winter, with input both ways. Without her we had not made it.



Then we had to clarify what kind of course we would present for our Palestinian friends. We based it on a program one of us had used earlier, called Making Women Visible. We had to introduce ourselves to the women and to the union. Then find a time suitable for the Palestinian women and create frames that suited them. We needed a financial plan and set up a budget. Nothing is free and NU has no money. We had to get an interpreter, and Lama rented a very skilled lady, who interpreted throughout the course. We had to have a comprehensive logistics plan and a place to stay.

Then we needed an invitation to the NU Women's Department and ask for participants. 15 signed up. We needed to work out the specific content, agree on a syllabus - Making women visible had to be adapted to their current situation - create a day by day roadmap, make speeches. And important: Prepare the translator as best as we could for her to know the most about what she was approaching. For our own part, we had to prepare ourselves by acquiring knowledge of NU, what these women represent, and what conditions they work and live under

In March everything was ready. We had a solid and working master plan, which was anchored in their own organization. We were thoroughly prepared and all details were thought of. But nevertheless: This was unplowed ground. The excitement on departure was great.

### **About the participants on the course.**

The group of TU women we met and who attended the course were very complex. Some were experienced elected representatives, small black-dressed elderly ladies with hijab from New Union, others were young inexperienced, some unemployed. They also came from different places; Tulkarem, Ramallah and Hebron. They came from the textile industry, newspaper, kindergarten and food industry. Most were employed by Palestinian employers, some worked with the settlers, and some even run kindergartens themselves. There had been a lot of fighting and power in the trade union movement earlier, and many had experience from greater times. But for various obvious reasons the struggle has slowed down for a while. Now they tell that the activity is on its way up again.

### **The implementation.**

The course was held for three days, consisting of an exchange between short introductions, group work, presentations and discussion in plenary. Our own number and how we had distributed the roles between us worked extremely smoothly. Two of us led the course, the other three participated in the same way as the Palestinian women and also had an introduction each. The two as leaders could concentrate on leading. We others contributed with issues about our own challenges in Norway, and this created a great sense of equality.



Our introductions fit very well into the course. First day's lecture was about Norwegian women's history in the trade union movement, about women-dominated unions like the match-workers, newspaper (paperwomen) distributors, textile workers and preschool teachers, focusing on struggle and strike. Then on ruling techniques, we also had role-play about ruling techniques in groups. It was both fun and challenging for the three Norwegians who joined the groups because so few spoke English. But we got help from the translator and we used a lot of body language. Everyone could identify with ruling techniques. Everyone got specific tasks to make an introduction about their issues.

The next day an introduction to "Making yourself heard", and all were given tasks based on the challenges they had, and everybody had to say something about this in plenary. The participants appreciated this and found it very useful.

The introduction of Planning a Campaign was about how systematically work with mapping and scheduling an action. Here there was a lot of news for even the experienced union representatives. They were excited about the simple and creative suggestions mentioned.

The topics the women picked up were: Wanting a day off with full payment, free from work on holidays, questions about working hours, toilet conditions, place to pray. Issues they wanted to problematize in the course were recruitment of women in the trade union movement, treatment of female workers, how to gain confidence from female workers, how do they get different political parties in the trade union to agree or cooperate, how to get more women representatives, how create cooperation between women from different unions and associations. These are issues we can recognize from our own Norwegian reality. They were cautious about talking about sexual harassment and violence at work, and they had not heard of MeToo.

The participants found that employers and management in the trade unions would not talk to them because they were women, they were ignored and were not allowed to speak and they were not trusted as elected representatives. They gradually realized that if women support each other, it's easier to be heard, and this was stated as something that was very positive with the course. They really experienced this in the practical exercises in the course.





### Experience and evaluation

We experienced the participants as disciplined, motivated, and committed. They would not have breaks and when we had finished them they were quickly in place. They listened to what was said and were active in the discussions. Eventually, the younger ones who did not have much experience in speaking in larger assemblies began to become more active. It was fun and inspiring to be involved in this development. It was especially a young girl who initially was very careful, but at the end she stood in front of us and talked and was safe and secure.

All participants submitted a written evaluation. Of the feedback we received, we understand that the course was a real big hit. They emphasize that the practice and training on the topics in the course were useful. They also say that they have gained new knowledge and become more aware of how to do union work. They want more and similar courses for those who participated this time and for others new women.

The fact that we shared our experiences from Norway happened to create very good contact very quickly. They said that they found it strange that women in Norway experience the same as them and that we had common problems, it was interesting to hear about it and it created a unity between us. The participants emphasized that this was something they really appreciated.

It would have been nice to have more time together informally, the whole course concept is based on that, but this we did not accomplish this time. Since we did not have the evenings together we might have had longer breaks and utilized them better. Communication eventually improved despite language differences. There were few who spoke English, but it turned out that more people understood, and their English improved the more they dared.

The course is also based on the fact that those who have been participants should be able to run similar courses themselves. Therefore, we are translating the entire course material into Arabic for further use by the unions on their own.



From the Norwegian women's point of view we are also very pleased with the course and think it was very successful. Most of it went as planned, but it is a course which changes according to how it evolves by participants and their needs. We left Palestine with a very positive feeling, a sense of togetherness and fellowship and also strongly and proudly felt to have participated in something that is significant. Because we shared our experiences and that some of us participated at the same level as the Palestinians, it enhanced the dialogue and the feeling of equality.

We want to do this again.  
And we shall.

**We want to develop this to be a continuous project, and we are planning another session in March 2019. It would be great indeed if we could make this an international event, and thus we would be very happy if other unions elsewhere were interested to join. We believe this project, as concrete and material as it is, would be easy to gather support for, both to fund and to engage in.**



Are you interested? Contact us!  
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