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Senegal

Being a woman in Senegal

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Q Tell us about the situation of Senegalese women?

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/25seneg.jpg>]

A In my country, they suffer very much from illiteracy, the super exploitation of their labour power in the workplace and deep-rooted cultural prejudices. They represent 52% of the total population of the country but are excluded from the formal system of employment where they represent less than 10%. On the other hand, they are in a majority in the informal sector (small traders, retail sales in the market and so on) with average daily incomes of around 20 FF. Admittedly, there are women who are involved in wholesale trade, but they are far from numerous. They are also in insecure employment in the food and fishing industry or they are temporary workers without social protection or safeguards against the employers.

Q Does that mean there are feminist movements that fight against this situation? And how do the parties of left like the PADS tackle the question?

A In the early 1970s, there were in Senegal radical feminists who blazed a trail for today's struggles, like Marie Angélique Savané. Today feminism is connected much more with respect for the dignity of women, with social, political and economic emancipation, while being rooted in women's positive cultural values. The battle for dignity is a stake for society. Thus, women express themselves through organizations, associations and groupings to reinforce solidarity between themselves and with men. It should be said that the discourse is not directly that of a break with capitalism, but in the long term, the requirement of an equalization of chances between men and women will come up against certain structures with a dynamic of radical opposition to social and cultural rigidities. Women also assert their femininity and their right to better health because the death rate is 510 per 100,000 in childbirth. Lastly, it is significant to mention the role played by the NGOs and certain projects for the elimination of illiteracy in national languages. As for And-Jef/PADS, it is openly feminist and advocates parity in equality. As a proof, And-Jef/PADS had a woman as campaign director for the parliamentary elections of April 2001.

Q Does that mean that the political parties accord a significant place to women?

A No. Both the PS and the other parties relegate women to the rank of voting fodder. Even if a woman is now Prime Minister for the first time in our history... It should however be noted that in the parties, women occupy positions like that of or deal with social questions or cultural activities. These are subordinate positions, then. Much remains to be done, especially in terms of political education.

Q Are women unionised?

A In their overwhelming majority, they are in the informal sector and in very insecure employment. This economic structure decreases the possibilities of unionisation, but in the food industry and teaching there has been mass unionisation. Other sectors have seen a strong participation of women both at the level of leadership and in the life of the unions: health, posts and telecommunications. Even if no woman leads a confederation of workers, the question of gender has become a concern thanks to the NGOs and women's associations and the women in the trade unions. There is progress but a lot more effort is needed.

Q Is there violence against women?

A Yes, a lot. I am a member of an association, the Committee Against Violence Against Women who work to end these practices. They exist in households, workplaces and services in the towns and in the countryside. It can be noted that violence increases with poverty, layoffs of workers and above all the frustration of the people. Female genital mutilation also exists but is forbidden by the new constitution of January 2001 and has been fought by the NGOs, women's associations and so on. There are also women's groups which fight all forms of violence through campaigns of consciousness raising and education.

Q Your party, **And-Jef/PADS**, voted for the new constitution. Did it improve women's rights?

A As regards women's rights in particular, there are positive decisions: previously, the women who account for 70% of agricultural production did not have the right to own land. In practice, there are some ethnic groups where women could own fields and land. But this progress is relative because it goes against tradition in several areas. Even if forced marriage is prohibited by the constitution, the existence of a presidential regime which concentrates power is likely to reduce all these gains, because progress as regards women's rights is real only with the deepening of democracy, liberty and an independent citizenship.

Q How did Senegalese women experience the World Social Forum?

A It should be stressed that the women of our country have begun to develop a spirit which is open to the world. More than 25,000 women met in the centre of the country (in Kaffrine) to prepare for the World March in New York. They realized that the world was in reality a small village and that they shared similar problems with the other women of the world. It was a moment of internationalist solidarity as in Porto Alegre. I was not there, but the women of Senegal and Africa were there and told us about everything that happened, particularly the alternatives to neo-liberal globalisation. Porto Alegre is no longer far from us. In a few months or a few years, we will need 50, 100, or 200 Porto Alegres across the whole world for another globalisation where the dignity of women is completely respected.