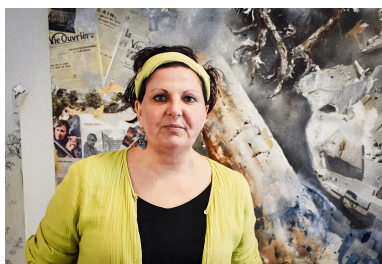


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France

“Fighting sexist and sexual violence means guaranteeing the place of women in the CGT”



- Features - Feminism -

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In what context was the CGT's [\[1\]](#) monitoring unit against sexist and sexual violence created?

The creation of the unit in November 2016 was part of an internal feminist dynamic. Since the end of the 90s, the Women-Gender Diversity Commission has developed several tools to make the place of women in the CGT visible. The 2007 Gender Equality Charter, but also a report on the comparative situation between women and men in the CGT carried out every year. An IRES study, conducted by Rachel Silvera and Tiphaine Rigaud, also focused on the obstacles and levers to keeping women in union responsibilities in 2016.

Since 1999, parity has been achieved within the Confederal Executive Committee and the Confederal Bureau. This was a very important step forward. But we had noticed that the renewal of women occupying first rank responsibilities was faster than that of men: they remained in office for a shorter period of time. It was therefore necessary to understand what produced these departures.

The creation of the unit also took place in a broader social context. This was before the #MeToo movement, but questions relating to the body, intimacy, menstruation, sexuality and violence were already beginning to occupy more of the public space. The term “femicide” was gradually becoming established. During the annual days organized by the Women-Diversity Commission, women questioned us more and more often about situations of violence that had not been resolved. Some no longer found their place in the CGT or ended up leaving the organization.

We therefore thought about creating a structure located between the victims and the trade unions: a dedicated space, recognised by the confederal leadership, capable of receiving their words and calling on the leaderships concerned. The unit was to become the voice of the victims.

So the unit was linked, from the beginning, to the question of the place of women in the organization?

Yes, absolutely. The establishment of the unit responds to the challenge of internal transformation of the CGT. We cannot claim to fight sexist and sexual violence in the world of work and in society if we are not able to confront it in our own organization. It is first of all a question of being consistent with the values we defend. But it is also a question of really guaranteeing the place of women in the CGT. As long as there is violence and relations of domination, women cannot fully occupy their place. It is also a democratic question: when there are relations of domination, there can be no real democracy.

There were four of us at the beginning: Maryse Dumas, Sabine Reynosa, Maryse Thaeron and me. I led the unit from its creation. Very quickly, we invited male comrades to join us. The mixed nature of the system corresponded to the principles of the CGT and our desire to advance feminist consciousness among both men and women. It must also

be recognized that the presence of men in the unit could reassure some comrades and help legitimize it. From the beginning, we conceived of our work as a learning process. In 2016, we did not have a ready-made model or a completely stabilized procedure. We built the system gradually, based on the situations encountered.

What types of situations are reported to the unit?

We were surprised, year after year, by the number and seriousness of the situations reported to us. The reports concern all possible forms of sexist and sexual violence: sexist comments or insults, exhibition, sexist moral harassment, sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape. Each year, we draw up between five and ten formal cases. In addition, there are situations directly dealt with by the victim support committees set up in the organisations. The cases officially sent to the unit therefore represent only part of the reality.

Every year, we carry out a report presented to the confederal leadership. This report allows us to take a step back, to report on the nature of the violence and to observe certain developments. We note, for example, that violence committed in the context of relationships between activists appears more and more clearly in the reports. Marital rape can now be named. This evolution also reflects the transformations at work in society as a whole, in particular the progression of debates on consent.

Making this violence visible is essential. It is an obstacle to keeping women in the organization, but also to the membership of new activists. The CGT has about 39% of women among its members. If we want to strengthen their place, the fight against violence is an absolutely essential lever.

In concrete terms, what happens when a person contacts the unit?

When a report is sent to the unit or directly to an organisation, a file is compiled. This is not a judicial investigation: we are neither the police nor the judiciary. The file is used to collect the words of the person who reports the facts, to specify them and to allow them to be characterised. It is strictly confidential.

This file is then submitted to an ad hoc committee. This committee is made up of the trade union organisations concerned with people who are not directly involved in the situation and who do not know the protagonists. The committee takes cognizance of the case, hears the person involved and formulates a political opinion.

The unit is not a decision-maker, nor is the ad hoc committee. The decision is made by the management group of the organisation concerned. This is important: the unit does not replace the CGT bodies. On the contrary, the system obliges each organisation and each directorate to assume its responsibilities.

This procedure is complicated and demanding. It does not work perfectly in all situations, because awareness of patriarchy, sexual violence and its effects on the place of women remains unequal. The responses provided can still vary greatly from one organization to another.

You insist on the need to develop a “culture of protection”. What does this expression cover?

The culture of protection consists of starting from the need to protect people who report violence and to allow them to continue to be activists. It is opposed to a culture of suspicion that leads to their word being immediately questioned or to considering the report as an attack on the organisation.

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When a union activist holding positions of responsibility is implicated, some may be tempted to think that the accusation is aimed at the CGT itself. This conspiracy rhetoric continues to work. It sometimes leads organizations to protect the person in question rather than to look at the facts and relations of domination.

The files therefore also have an educational function. They must make it possible to show what happened, to identify the violence and to understand why a relationship was unbalanced. Patriarchy is at work everywhere: in society, in the world of work and in progressive organizations themselves. Acknowledging it is a condition for being able to fight it.

The CGT is also recognising this more and more clearly in its policy texts. But this awareness is not automatically and uniformly reflected in all structures. This is why we must continue to convince, train and make violence visible.

What is the Common Framework for Action on Gender-Based and Sexual Violence?

The Common Framework for Action, or CCA, is a user manual for union leadership. It answers a very concrete question: when an organisation receives a report of sexist or sexual violence, what should it do? It specifies the different stages of the response: the receipt of the report, the constitution of the file, the formation of an ad hoc committee, the hearing of the person involved, the formulation of a political opinion and the decision-making by the leadership. Its objective is to secure the process and avoid improvisations that can aggravate situations.

The CCA is the result of joint work between the experience accumulated by the unit and the exchanges conducted with the departmental unions and federations. There was a lot of back and forth so that it could be suitable for as many organisations as possible. When we developed it, we already had eight years of experience. We had been able to observe what worked, what didn't and what needed to be better supervised.

The framework must give confidence to victims, who now know what is supposed to happen when they make a report. But it must also give confidence to organisations, by telling them what to do and what to avoid. Political decisions then remain their responsibility.

This framework has just been appended to the CGT statutes. What is the scope of this decision?

This is an important feminist victory. The common framework for action was first adopted by the National Confederal Committee in November 2025. Its appending to the statutes was then approved by about 71% of the mandates at the congress. The majority of the unions have therefore clearly chosen to take this new step. The inclusion in the statutes is more politically binding for the organisations. It affirms that the treatment of sexist and sexual violence is not an optional or peripheral approach, but is part of the functioning and principles of the CGT.

However, we must remain lucid. The CGT is a federal organization. A recalcitrant structure can still refuse to apply the process correctly or remain suspicious of a victim. The appending of the framework to the statutes does not mean that all resistance will disappear overnight. But we must measure how far we have come. The charter for equality between women and men was adopted by the National Confederal Committee in 2007, then appended to the statutes only in 2013. It therefore took six years. For the common framework for action, a few months separated its adoption by the CCN from its inclusion in the statutes. This testifies to an acceleration of feminist awareness within the CGT.

How did the discussion go during the congress?

The unit defended the framework in the continuity of its daily activity. The political campaign in favour of appending was then carried out by the general secretary of the CGT, by the Women-Diversity Commission, in particular by Myriam Lebkit, as well as by all those who considered this step necessary. Many discussions took place within the organisations and between the different structures.

What was particularly pleasing during the congress was the signal sent by the trade unions. From the beginning of the sequence devoted to the common framework for action, we felt that progress was widely considered necessary. Several interventions were very moving. The opposition that existed in certain organisations was ultimately not expressed publicly.

Maryse Dumas spoke of a sequence of “political maturity” on sexist and sexual violence. Her testimony was particularly powerful. As a former confederal leader, she could measure how far she had come: in the past, those in charge had to manage the situations reported to them without having a really established collective framework. Today, we have a protocol and we are able to explain publicly how the CGT intends to act.

Can this progress have effects beyond the CGT?

Every progress made in an organisation can show others that it is possible to move forward. The FSU, for example, has already enshrined in its statutes the existence of its unit against sexist and sexual violence, even if the measures are not identical. [\[2\]](#) Political parties have also developed their own procedures, sometimes more centralised and more directly decision-making. The creation of the CGT unit in 2016 was relatively pioneering in the trade union field. Today, we are neither alone nor necessarily the most advanced in all aspects. But the inter-organisational work we have been carrying out since 2021 is extremely valuable: it brings together nineteen structures (unions, parties and associations) and makes it possible to share experiences, reflect on practices and build common tools. For example, we are currently working on a feminist notebook offering responses to sexist remarks encountered in organisations. These exchanges are essential. No organisation can claim to have found the perfect method on its own. All of them must learn from the difficulties and progress of others.

The unit itself has changed its practices over the past ten years. What are the main changes?

We have learned a lot. We have not only built a reporting procedure. We have also thought about the preservation of our archives, confidentiality and compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation. These questions are essential, because we handle extremely sensitive information.

We also took into account the psychological effects of listening on the members of the cell. An agreement was made with a therapist specialising in psychotrauma. With her, we organise two group sessions per year to reflect on our practices. We work in particular on vicarious trauma, i.e. the effects that repeated exposure to traumatic stories can have on the people in charge of collecting testimonies. When you only think about a case, when you sleep badly or when what you hear profoundly affects your personal life and relationships, you need to be able to identify these signs.

Supervision helps us to find the right posture. We can also do individual sessions with our therapist when necessary. This is not a personal therapy, but a professional and activist space to understand how to listen without being overwhelmed and without stepping out of one's role.

Concerning the victims, the Confederation has also signed an agreement with a clinical psychologist, trained in trauma, with the ICV (Life Cycle Integration) method. This allows us to help our comrades over a few sessions while they find their own psychological follow-up in the territory.

Finally, the activity of the unit and the organisations that take a stand against violence can give rise to legal challenges: defamation proceedings, accusations of invasion of privacy or remedies based on data protection. We must therefore work with lawyers who are familiar with sexist and sexual violence, trade union rights and issues related to personal data. This is now part of our activity.

As we approach the tenth anniversary of the unit, what is your assessment?

We have come a long way. Today we have a recognised unit, collective experience, a common framework for action and inclusion in the statutes. The CGT is much better equipped than it was ten years ago.

But the place of women is still not fully guaranteed. Violence is still present and some situations are extremely serious. The annexation of the common framework for action to the statutes must not lead to a relaxation of our vigilance. On the contrary, it gives us an additional responsibility.

We must continue to make the violence visible, to demonstrate its effects on the activists and on the democratic functioning of the organization, to fight the strategies of protection of the aggressors and to convince the comrades.

The fight against sexist and sexual violence is a political battle in its own right. It is not only about resolving individual situations: it concerns the type of trade union organisation that we want to build. An organisation in which women can join, be active, exercise responsibilities and remain in the long term cannot tolerate violence or relations of domination. The battle continues, but we have undeniably taken a major step.

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[1] The General Confederation of Labour (CGT), is an inter-professional confederation of French trade unions representing employees. It is the second-largest trade union in the private sector in terms of the number of votes cast in workplace elections, and the largest in the public sector.

[2] The Fédération syndicale unitaire (FSU) is the main trade union federations in the education sector in France.