

Amina Shafiq: Women and Labor Unions in Egypt

Amina Shafiq is currently the only female board member of the Egyptian Press Syndicate, and the only journalist who has been elected for four consecutive times – since 1971 – to this post.

Shafiq, who started her career when still a first-year student at the American University of Cairo (1953), works now as a reporter at the Labor Unions Section at "Al Ahram" newspaper, the most prestigious Egyptian daily.

During the last round of elections, she competed against 18 men for the Press Syndicate's Board, whose membership includes 12 journalists. In winning she gathered 87 more votes than the next selected member.

Writing about "Women and Labor Unions" in her country, Shafiq says: "In Egypt there are two kinds of union organizations. The first is the workers' unions. These unions include all those working for salaries and wages in the private, public and government sectors including industry, agriculture, services and government The second kind of union organization, called professional syndicates, organizes professionals (doctors, journalists, teachers, accountants, engineers, lawyers etc.) on the basis of their particular profession."

"Women workers, white or blue collar, have complete liberty in affiliating or disaffiliating with workers unions," adds Shafiq. "They are equal to men in this respect. However, in professional syndicates, although they are equal to men, women are obliged by law to join and never quit or they will lose their jobs. In addition, female professionals are comparatively active in their syndicates, but very few women have ever been elected to the governmental bodies of their unions."

"In agriculture, the picture is even worse," declares Shafiq. "In this field women are still typically employed as unpaid family workers. They are treated with children as a single category. Moreover, affiliation with agricultural unions is nonexistent."

Why do working women, whether professional or manual workers, not participate in trade union life and activities with more energy and



enthusiasm? The answer, Shafiq says, lies in two factors, subjective and objective.

The first is the general political atmosphere of the country which does not encourage public activities. The second has to do with:

- The high rate of illiteracy among women (30.4%),
- The lack of better services (housing accommodations, transportation) which prevents women from giving up time and effort to trade union activities,
- The lack of child care facilities (despite the fact that by law, every plant employing more than 100 women is required to provide child care),
- The high nursery school or kindergarten fees,
- The short working life of the majority of working women.

This dilemma can be resolved, says Shafiq, "by restoring a better political atmosphere so that trade unions would start playing a more active role in collective bargaining, and by recognizing the importance of a political and economic policy that is directed toward building a modern economic sector (especially in agriculture), that would provide jobs for all unemployed people (men and women) and restore their labor rights (wages, housing, services)."

* This information is based on the following sources:
 - An interview of Amina Shafiq in *Sayidaty* (Arabic Women's Weekly), 8-14 August 1983, p. 23-25.
 And a paper presented by Amina Shafiq entitled "Women and Labor Unions in Egypt", at the two conferences held May 6-7, 1982 and April 14-15, 1983, at the University of California, Berkeley.