

Women's Committee FERPA Congress April 2023 (Mireille Paume)

This congress is taking place after a health crisis of global magnitude, followed by the outbreak of a war here in Europe, and then an economic crisis coupled with an unprecedented social crisis.

Although the mandate you gave me started well, these successive crises have changed the way we work.

First of all, we had to adapt to being confined and putting our lives on hold, in addition to all the difficulties of a situation for which we were not prepared.

During this period, reality quickly started to impact on our activity. We had to deal with the challenges of a failing health system across Europe, conflicting decisions made by our governments and, above all, a stigmatisation of the elderly who were initially seen as the ones responsible for the health situation.

FERPA played its part during this crisis, recreating the links necessary to hold meetings. We were therefore able to have women's committees.

We needed to adapt to the new tools, namely video conferencing, in order to maintain contact and keep up to date on each other's news. In this way, we were able to move forward together, demanding that vaccines be accessible to all, that the health system be accessible to all, and that the isolation of elderly people in EPHADs [residential homes] and hospitals be brought to an end.

During this period, we were able to raise awareness of violence against women, which unfortunately increased, with the victims unable to access the associations and support needed to escape from their horrifying situations.

We demanded that shelters be reopened and support resumed.

The health crisis has unfortunately highlighted the ills of our society.

But just as the health crisis was fading into the background, war broke out in Europe and unfortunately, war is synonymous with violence, insecurity, and disrupted lives.

During periods of war and armed conflict, women in particular are the victims of violence, especially sexual violence.

In times of war, the risk of a woman being raped is multiplied by 10. Women's social status and their sex make them targets and even tactics of war.

We must speak our loudly and clearly: war is incompatible with our values of equality, respect, and women's rights.

Fighting for survival, for their dignity, for their families. The image of war with its bombs cannot hide the fact that war also means misery, fear, and too often a return to ancestral practices that violate women's rights.

I would like to pay tribute to those women living permanently in countries at war, whether waged with weapons or ideologies. In the 21st century

we cannot accept that a woman is put to death because a strand of hair is sticking out from her headscarf, because she wants to drive, to educate herself, and simply to live without having diktats from another century imposed on her.

We are living in the 21st century and yet women have never had so much difficulty in asserting their rights and protecting their wins. The hard-won gains of our generation are being called into question. This is due to the rise of extremist ideas that have taken advantage of the situation to impose a dogmatism that places women in an inferior position in society. Consequently, women's rights to abortion and their right to work in all occupations and be paid equally to men are at risk.

The suffering of living under bombs or under a dictatorship cannot erase or compete with the difficulty of making ends meet.

Indeed, the facts speak for themselves: the reports that FERPA has produced show that women are increasingly affected by poverty. With lower pensions than men, women in Europe are becoming poorer and poorer. And the economic crisis and soaring inflation are hitting them hard. We need to restore

the laws, treaties, and directives that have been signed. And we made a headway on this by co-signing a letter to President Ursula von der Leyen in May 2020 when we were informed that the European Commission was considering freezing the EU directive on pay transparency and the whole gender equality strategy.

But all the texts and directives in the world will never be more than pieces of paper if the human and financial resources are not put in place to enforce them. Violence against older women is not reflected in the figures, and therefore there are no resources to combat it.

We were particularly active on 8 March, which I remind you is neither Women's Day nor International Women's Day, but International Women's Rights Day, and also on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Two days isn't much, but they are sorely needed, and if we don't take advantage of these occasions to put forward our demands and needs, we won't be able to talk about them during the rest of the year. These two dates are undeniably focal points in the fight for the defence of women's rights and the struggles faced by women in our respective countries. Thank you to all those who shared their challenges and protests with us.

The economic crisis is affecting women particularly badly, and the drip-feeding of aid is not going to solve these difficulties.

The battle we are waging today in France is undeniably heading for victory.

But can we be satisfied with winning alone when we are confronted with the challenges of Europe as a whole? Our aim is to create a Europe with more social rights for all of its people.

The current proposal is to offer a minimum pension of €1,200 in France. However, the restrictions are so stringent that virtually no-one, and very few women, will be entitled to it. In fact, we consider it little more than a smokescreen. And yet, if we took them at their word, we would believe that, yes, in Europe it is indeed possible to demand a review of the rights of female pensioners who are below the poverty line, the money for wars, the super profits of big companies, let's tax them, let's go and take the money from wherever it is, let's fight back against this misery.

Trade unionism must be the vehicle used to raise awareness of women's demands and needs and to help achieve them. We must be able to work with associations, with other forces, but we must never forget that a women's committee within a trade union, and in particular within FERPA,

is not about pitting women against men. On the contrary it is about working together and finding solutions to move forward together towards a more just society.

“We will transform retirement. It will no longer be seen as the period before death but rather a new stage of life.” These are the words of Ambroise Croizat, founder of social security in France.

Because peace is built on social progress, women must make their voices heard and continue to be actively involved in the work carried out in each of our countries on a daily basis.

I cannot end my speech without welcoming our new General Secretary, a young woman elected by us at the 53rd CGT [General Confederation of Labour].