

## Khadija Ghamiri

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Khadiha Ghamiri is a state engineer in the administration of the National Agency Land Conservation in Rabat, Secretary General of the Moroccan Labour Union in Rabat, and a founding member of the union's Organization of Working Women. She was the first woman to represent paid employees from the Moroccan Labour Union in the Assembly of Councillors (the second chamber of Parliament), where she has served since 2003. She is 55 years of age, married, and the mother of three children. She lives in Rabat.

**What does the word "reform" mean to you as a Moroccan citizen?**

It means that there has been a deterioration with negative repercussions for the citizenry in general, and for the working classes in particular, and that must therefore be reformed and changed.

**What are the main factors that determine the success of any reform project?**

The measure of success or failure is the extent to which it has an impact on the citizens for whom the reform project was developed and who should benefit from it. For myself as a trade unionist, it can be measured by the extent to which it generates protest and anger from people affected by the reform.

**If you were to identify what is in most urgent and immediate need of reform, in what area would you begin?**

In education and health.

**And which of these two fields would you start with?**

With education, because I believe that we can't even speak about a democratic country or a country that is heading towards development, or that has reached a certain level of progress unless there has been fundamental reform to the education system. Education provides us with the human resources capable of making this development happen.

**What would you like to see achieved first in education?**

Education has to be a right for all. The government must work to guarantee this right for everyone using all available means, including finding work or sources of livelihood for families that are forced to stop their children from continuing their education or keep them out of school, primarily because of the lack of infrastructure, including accessible schools, particularly in rural areas, or because their children have to work due to poverty. Child labour is another subject that requires special attention.

### The Code of Personal Status and Inheritance modified the promulgation of the Family Law in 2004. What is your opinion of this law?

What is new in the Family Law is that as a bill it was subject to debate and decided in parliament, as has been the case with a number of other laws. What this means is that its sanctity was lifted, which is a positive development for two reasons. Firstly, because the “taboo” was removed from the Family Law, which can now always be discussed and modified. The second reason concerns its content, whereby trusteeship for women was abolished, the age of marriage was raised, and a group of legal provisions were introduced that I would describe as positive. And yet these positive amendments remain incomplete. On the one hand, there is a major shortcoming in implementation, because the Family Law itself, i.e. its provisions, does not guarantee its own enforcement. There are gaps that leave the door open for its interpretation by various actors, especially members of the judiciary, who have used it as a basis of authority from which to assess whether a minor may marry, for instance. On the other hand, a number of provisions remain in the Personal Status Code that I and other campaigners from the women’s and human rights movement advocated to be amended, such as provisions relating to polygamy, *Khula* divorce (where the wife makes a financial payment), and the fact that the right to divorce is still the husband’s prerogative, while the wife has to resort to requesting *Tatliq* (judicial dissolution of the marriage) or *Shiqaq* (“breach” or marriage dissolution on the grounds of irreconcilable differences). Thus the image of women in the law still reflects their inferiority. In addition, the law doesn’t recognise the domestic work that is done by women as it doesn’t count it. While it specifies the agreement that is entered into by the two spouses, i.e. the official documentation in which the common property is registered, this provision remains hollow because it is not being implemented. Similarly, it does not guarantee the rights of women after divorce in relation to any assets she acquired during the marriage.

### The Family Law established the principle of equality. What does equality between the sexes within the family mean to you?

Equality between the sexes within the family means first of all that all decisions regarding the family should be taken jointly by husband and wife, be they decisions concerning the family finances or the schooling of the children. However, this must be preceded by the financial autonomy of the woman. If not, then equality, even though it is stipulated in the Family Law and elsewhere, will remain ink on paper. With regard to other provisions, however, for example those related to polygamy and divorce, we cannot even speak about equality, which remains elusive and calls for a major struggle on the part of the women’s movement, which must itself be strong and democratic if it is to be achieved.

### Do you feel that there has been a change as a woman in your family environment since the promulgation of the law?

I personally, and all democratic women’s campaigners, have been unable to discern any change because the law has not brought them anything as campaigners. At the same time as they are campaigning within society – among all its various components including the unions – they are also campaigning within the home to obtain some of

their rights. A male mentality still prevails in society, and combating this mentality is part of the daily struggle.

**Regarding the Soulaliyate women's movement, the state recently responded to their demands by recognising their rights to benefit from restitution for communal land on an equal basis with men. When and how did you hear of the problems faced by Soulaliyate women?**

The problem of the Soulaliyate women brings me back to the question you raised earlier about equality. If the Family Law had established equality in fact, then this problem would not arise in the first place, because the Soulaliyate people, men and women, live on the land, and so when it is sold women should benefit from these transactions.

**What do you think are the prospects of this movement?**

There are a number of movements that could go in the same direction. I mention by way of example the movement of the people of "Siyy al-Tibi" in the town of Sala, including women, who I think number around 400 families. These people have lost their land, which was arbitrarily taken from them following its purchase. Every Thursday their families stage protest vigils holding placards. There is also the Coordinating Committee Against Rising Prices and Demanding Better Services, which consists of representatives of unionist, political and civil society organisations, as well as citizens. It has organised protests that escalated straight after the prices of services and basic goods rocketed, as well as action over poor transport services in Rabat, where citizens face a lack of buses and poor services. That was a powerful movement.

Also worth mentioning are the citizens who are protesting against rising water and electricity bills, and who have held vigils in several regions and cities, as well as citizens who protested against the government's handling of flood damages.

**Does that mean that these were spontaneous movements?**

They were spontaneous in character because they were reactions to the conditions in which these people were living, and since they are no longer able to tolerate them, street protests have become the solution.

**By virtue of your trade union work you have first-hand experience of protest and activist movements. What about women's involvement and participation in these movements?**

I don't wish to be described as a feminist if I say that women have a substantial presence in these movements, because everyone knows that women suffer more from these problems, and especially from poverty. Regarding the problem of water and electricity, it is women, sadly, who bear the burden in the home. And it's the same with basic goods, because although women have no economic status, according to the statistics, in actual fact they participate in the economy, either directly as employees, or indirectly, by resorting to all possible means to eke out a living for their families (for example in domestic service, which is still unregulated and so not recognised as a profession). On the other hand, there is now a significant proportion of women who are breadwinners for their families, either because their husbands aren't able to provide for their families,

or because of separation and other reasons. This is in relation to the unregulated protest movements. As for the regulated movements, such as those within the union, women are always at the frontline in protests, particularly in sectors where women are heavily present. These sectors are vulnerable in the sense either that the applicable social laws are not implemented, or are implemented inadequately. As I said, this is not a feminist issue, but rather the reality in which we are living and that we see every day.

**Measures have been taken to increase the representation of women in parliament via the national list in 2002, and in the local councils through the additional lists in 2009. Do these measures meet your expectations as a woman?**

I would put the current reforms between parentheses because I don't regard them as real reforms. They are not heading in the direction of creating real equality for women in politics; the national list was introduced not as a result of political will, but in response to the reports that the government submits to the UN committees. On the other hand, in order to entrench genuine political action from which women and also men can benefit, elections must be made democratic through a law providing several mechanisms. Elections must also be monitored by an independent body and not the Ministry of the Interior. I think that this issue, the way in which elections are held, has resulted in broad and widespread apathy among the Moroccan people, and a clear boycott has been seen at the ballot box.

The political parties must themselves adopt the principle of equality internally in a real sense, not only in their slogans. We still get the impression that women are merely votes in the elections, because once the elections are over and the seats allocated, it becomes clear that the status of women is the same as it ever was. The image of women in the media mirrors the prevailing concept of their inferiority. The school curricula and text books still contain stereotypes about women that merely serve to reproduce the same reality. There is also a need to conduct health reform, particularly in women's reproductive health and other women's health issues, since reproductive health and education indicators mean that Morocco ranks low on the Human Development Index.

**Do you think that these conditions are dependent on the success of measures to raise the representation of women in the elected assemblies?**

It is tied to the instigation of genuine reform. I regard the current reforms merely as programmes and empty slogans. We hear, for example, about emergency education programmes, and we see plans with numbers, and then plans in colours – a green plan for agriculture and a blue plan for tourism. I, as a union representative for employees, be it in the private, public or consumer sectors, am not able to feel the effects of these plans, slogans or programmes on the working classes, who are an essential component of development. I doubt that these plans had any positive effects. In order for reform to succeed, representatives of the people must be involved in formulating the reform plans, because reform that is handed down from above will never succeed.

**Do you have any other suggestions to make regarding measures to increase the representation of women?**

I think that a quota of 10% or 12% is humiliating to women, who make up 51% of society, according to the official statistics. We should, of course, account for 50% in the two houses. People may argue that 10% is just a start, but it is an inauspicious one. We should begin from 30% or 40%; starting at 10% doesn't meet the political expectations of the women's movements.

**Based on your experience in the second chamber of Parliament, what is your general impression of the atmosphere during debates on reform related to the status of women?**

I took part in the debate on the Family Law, and the various proposals were not taken into consideration. There were three women in the Assembly of Councillors in 2003, which rose to 6 out of a total of 275 Councillors in 2009, which is a miserable proportion. These six women have no weight in the Assembly. The problem with Parliament isn't only about the representation of women, but also about the political parties. We know how they entered both chambers of Parliament. They defend the parties' policies, which don't represent the Moroccan people, including in issues relating to women. And at the same time there has been no change in the way in which male members of parliament deal with women's issues. They merely show some appreciation or marvel at the fact that women now know how to give a speech and debate with the government. However, when I had the occasion to follow the public sessions in the first chamber, I noticed the high level of some of the women parliamentarians, especially those who were active campaigners within the women's movement. Their questions, the way they monitored the government and other things gave you a clear sense they were not in Parliament just because they're women, but because they deserve the responsibility. And here I come back to the question of what sort of parliament it is that we're speaking of, especially since illiteracy, be it functional, legal or cultural illiteracy, is still widespread in the parliament, and hence the people can't rely on it to represent them.

**How do you view the development of the status of women in terms of the participation in the workplace, in the economy, in society, in politics, and in the family?**

Running the family is what has made women go out to work, not the law. In terms of the economy, women didn't go out to work because of the political will for women to enter the field of employment and participate in the economy, but because of the bourgeois need for cheap labour and the need of women to provide for their families. And the infrastructure has not been provided to accompany women as they go out to work and facilitate their task, even though it is they who continue to bear the brunt of domestic chores and child-rearing.

On the other hand, in the absence of universal and free education, the low level of educational attainment among most women relegates them to the bottom of the public service ladder, given their deteriorating status in terms of their wages and their professional relationships with their bosses, and the fact that they are not promoted to senior positions. Even women officials don't enjoy equality with men in the allocation of management positions. Take, for example, the agricultural sector, where 10% of women are officials, but less than 2% of these are managers. We may therefore conclude that there is prejudice against women in this area.

Most female workers are employed in vulnerable sectors, such as the textile, garment or food canning industries. All of these sectors have seen breaches of social legislation, including the Labour Law, regardless of its deficiencies, which result from what I consider to be the over-flexibility of its provisions. Women working in agriculture have to endure harsh working conditions, widespread sexual harassment, a lack of transportation, etc. If we were to place the economic participation of women on one side of the scale and their remuneration on the other, we would find the former heavily weighed down compared to their paltry wages, and thus there is an unfair distribution of wealth, including in pay.

However, there is a further area in which one can perceive development – albeit sluggish – namely the presence of women in certain positions, including as judges and entrepreneurs, though one hopes that a woman entrepreneur would be aware of the suffering of working women, or at least try to understand it and comply with the law.

### What problems do you encounter at work as a human being and as a citizen?

The problems I experience as an employees' representative are the daily injustices and violations inflicted on both male and female workers, whether because of a lack of respect for the Labour Law or the undermining of trade union action. Here I focus on the sectors in which women work, and as soon as a union office is established, attempts are made to undermine it by all means.

I'd like to raise another important issue, which is the fact that the union is still performing the functions of the Ministry of Labour, even today, and it is the union that is calling for the implementation of the law. The union has to demand improvements in working conditions to levels far above those provided by law, by concluding collective agreements, for example. We haven't yet achieved these goals, and so my problem at work lies in my conflicts with employers, since they don't acknowledge the law and aren't afraid of government representatives, which is also problematic.

### And in the home?

The usual.

### And in society?

Here I would mention the daily protests that are staged by the unemployed, particularly those with university degrees, who are protesting in their thousands on a daily basis on the streets of the city. That's what I see on the streets, and it pains me to see those unemployed, lost youths, and also that the country isn't benefitting from their abilities. Instead of giving them jobs in all the various fields so as to allow them to contribute to the country's development, these unemployed youths, whose families paid an arm and a leg for them to study and get their university degrees, find themselves beaten with sticks. This is the epitome of toying with people's lives and marring the country's development.

### So you suffer from your experience of these problems within society. Do these problems differ for men and women?

A short time ago the Moroccan Association for Human Rights and other groups organised a vigil in solidarity with women teachers who went on a hunger strike that has lasted for 51 days, because of the problems they have in moving to workplaces located close to their husbands and children. In the last few days they have even refused water or sugar, which means that they are prepared to die. The government has now refused to enter into a dialogue with them. Yesterday their children and husbands came to the vigil. This is one example of the suffering of women.

In terms of the difference in the problems that affect men and women, the only area where perhaps there is equality between men and women in Morocco is in beatings and arrests. Women are subjected to beatings at the front of protests, including protests by the unemployed. However, it is positive that, despite the arrests, the repression and its consequences, including women suffering miscarriages, there are still women in the street protests, because they are resolute in demanding the right to work.

### What is your experience with women's associations?

As a member of the Organization of Working Women of the Moroccan Labour Union, I campaigned alongside my union comrades in the National Council to Change the Personal Status Code and for the Defence of Women's Rights in the 1990s. I regard this as an excellent experience, even though it didn't end as we would have wished. It was, nonetheless, a positive experience that enabled all the women's associations to come together over a single issue, and it certainly played a major role in the amendments that were made to the Code.

I work in various fields as a trade unionist in relation to women and employment, including in the private sector and the public service. However, in the women's rights organisations I get many opportunities to discuss issues that affect women thoroughly. My work with the Moroccan Association for Human Rights has also given me the chance to discuss human rights issues and the links between them, because workers' rights are an integral part of universal rights. I believe that working on each of these fronts reinforces the others, and that the key issue is working towards the establishment of a democratic society in which social justice and equality prevails, both between the sexes and between the various groups within society, regardless of creed, age or profession.

### Have they influenced your character?

These associations and organisations have definitely had an influence on my character, because I wasn't born as I am now. Of course, I have had a sense of struggle since I was a schoolgirl. The National Union of Moroccan Students was my real school. It was where I was raised, alongside other male and female activists, and where I acquired the means of struggling for change.

### What do you dream of as a woman, even if it is difficult or impossible to achieve at the present time?

I dream of going to the industrial zone at lunchtime and not finding women eating in the street or sitting and waiting for someone to give them a job. I dream of women leaving

the factories and finding transportation in which to travel in humane conditions, and of seeing joy and happiness in their faces when, after the day's work is over, they are ready to spend the rest of their day in a pleasant atmosphere, in the home and on the streets. I dream that these women are able to participate in public life, be it in the unions, civil society organisations or political parties, and for them to participate effectively and not only in the economic domain. I dream of going to the market and finding men and women carrying food, happy to be bringing food and clothes for their children. I dream of walking past a shopping centre and seeing women shopping even when it is not a feast day, and not having to apply for a loan or to sell their furniture to buy a ram for Eid Ul-Adha. I dream of demonstrations by civil society groups that are not met with beatings and arrests. I dream of journalists being able to publish what they really think, within the framework of freedom of expression, without fear of arrest, prosecution or political detention. I have many dreams, not all of which would be difficult to achieve if we had true representation that reflected the will of the people. It calls for many things, first and foremost the amendment of the constitution to establish democracy and institute genuine equality in all fields.

**And what do you dream of as a citizen?**

I don't see the difference.