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INVESTIGATION INTO TUNISIAN FEMALE TEXTILE WORKERS



THE REJECTS OF FAST FASHION



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Since 2015, she has been the Tunisian correspondent for JusticeInfo.net, a website of the Swiss Fondation Hironnelle, specializing in international criminal and transitional justice around the world. In 2016, she co-authored with Hedia Baraket an investigative book on the Tunisian transition: "Ces nouveaux mots qui font la Tunisie"- The new words that make Tunisia - (Cérès Editions).

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85% of textile workers in the Monastir region are women. These are the little hands of Fast fashion, whose working conditions are among the most arduous, if not the most inhumane, in the world of subcontracting in Tunisia. The suspension of the Multi Fibre Arrangement (MFA) since the early 2000s has further exacerbated violations of their rights.

In this investigation, we have tried to render their voices heard, voices that are not always audible under our skies; these are the tales of torment and the stories of resistance.

Ksibet El Madiouni, a sunny day in February 2024. A few minutes past noon, the small town located 10 km south of Monastir took on the colors of the blouses worn by female textile workers: pink, blue, green, mauve, white... A stamp of the female workers' affiliation to each of Ksibet El Madiouni's small manufacturing units. These women, whose average age is between 20 and 40 years, would occupy a stretch of sidewalk here, the stairs of a house under construction there, and a roundabout further on. They would eat their lunch rather quickly, chatting with their mouths stuffed of food. Underage girls of 15 to 16; little Cosettes¹ emerge among the duos and trios of the said female workers. There's no time for them to take their time, or even to get out of their aprons: they only have half an hour for a lunch break outdoors. For in these small sewing workshops that usually gather an average of some thirty workers and that are dotted around the residential areas of Ksibet El Madiouni and specializing in subcontracting for internationally renowned brands such as Zara, Diesel, Levis, Benetton, Tommy, Dolce&Gabbana, Guess, Max Mara, Gap, Darjeeling, IKKS, Hugo Boss, Ralph Lauren, Marco Polo... the purpose of refectories have changed over time; they have been transformed into storage sites for fabric materials and export-ready merchandise.

« They go outside because they also need to breathe fresh air and warm up in the sunshine. Many of those we interviewed have developed allergies to dust, asthma caused by cotton fibers, and allergies to the toxic products used to dye jeans in particular. Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are also very common among these female workers, due to the rigidity of sitting for several hours in front of their sewing machines and on seats unsuited to the arduous nature of their work »,

says Amani Allagui, project coordinator for the Monastir branch of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES). This NGO has made the rights of female textileworkers the subject of both field research² and advocacy for better access to healthcare.

However, this half-hour break, which is sometimes nibbled by the bosses when orders have to be delivered urgently: "Their time is precious and ours is worthless", protests Fadhila, 32, a female textile worker in Ksibet El Madiouni³. The said break does not make them oblivious to the pressure they're under all day long, and particularly the race for optimal yield scrupulously timed by the "cheffa", a term used to designate their female supervisor. And be careful not to slow down!

But how do they manage on rainy days, or even midday in July and August, when the crushing, lethal and tiresome sun is at its zenith, turning the streets and the whole town into a furnace?

¹ Cosette is a fictional character in the 1862 novel *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, and it is synonymous with abused children who are exploited by adults

² Mounir Hassine : *Violations of the economic and social rights of women workers in the textile sector, FTDES, 2014* In https://ftdes.net/violations-des-droits-economiques-et-sociaux-des-femmes-travailleuses-dans-le-secteur-de-textile-monastir__trashed/

³ The majority (most ?) of female textile workers have requested anonymity. We've therefore changed their first names and hidden their surnames

● 85% FEMALE EMPLOYEE QUOTAS

The working conditions of the female textile workers of Ksibet El Madiouni resemble those of thousands of other female workers in this sector, who would head off every morning to factories in several delegations of the Monastir governorate: Ksar Helal, Jemmal, Khniss, Bembla, Menzel Nour, Sayada, Lamta, Bouhjar, Teboulba, Touza and Sahline. Monastir (160 km southeast of Tunis) is the leading textile production hub in Tunisia, with 397 SMEs specializing in garments, 86.5% of which export their entire production⁴. More than a quarter of the total of companies in the sector at national level. With 70.77% of textile companies, this sector employs 44,625 workers in this governorate, the majority of whom are women (nearly 85%), according to the FTDES study on violations of the economic and social rights of women workers in the textile sector in the Monastir region. Firstly, sewing remains a gendered profession in Tunisia. Secondly, its rather low wages are culturally viewed as supplementary household income. In today's reality, this is not always the case. And thirdly, this rather needy female workforce, with its relatively low level of education⁵, has a reputation for being less inclined to protest, despite the two-pronged enslavement perpetuated by patriarchal and capitalist domination.

The textile-clothing sector represents an important lever for the Tunisian economy, with an export value that reached 2.62 billion dinars (\$862.4 million) during the first quarter of 2023, exceeding for the first time its level achieved during the same period in 2019, as was announced by the Tunisian Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy in a press release published on Wednesday April 26, 2023⁶. Nevertheless, this promising sector remains entirely dependent on European brands and contractors; they impose on local subcontractors the demands of quality, output, deadlines and pace of work tailored to the dictates of Fast fashion, whose watchwords are: ever faster, ever-more collections and choice, at ever-lower prices. This model, which no longer recognizes the seasons, has a disastrous impact on human resources, on whose backs huge profits are made, with ready-to-wear items sold in stores at three times their manufacturing cost⁷, indicating that natural resources, in particular the groundwater in the Monastir region, which is depleted by the large volumes of water used for washing jeans (the documentary: Infiltrators at the number one ready-to-wear brand).

● END OF THE MULTI FIBRE ARRANGEMENT, START OF FLEXIBLE WORKING

Tunisia has become a textile paradise for European countries such as France, Belgium, Italy, Germany and Spain, since the introduction of Law no. 72-38 of April 27, 1972, creating a special regime for exporting industries. This law was promulgated soon after the liberalization of the Tunisian economy following the socialist and collectivist experience of the 1960s, when the State nationalized import-export through the creation of public offices. This was driven by ambitions to create as many jobs as possible, improve foreign exchange earnings and increase growth. The establishment of companies born under Law n°72 with 60% of their capital held by foreigners

4 *Corporate responsibility with regard to human rights*: Exploratory study of the textile sector in the governorate of Monastir, ASF, May 2023 <https://asf.be/publication/french-corporate-responsibility-with-regard-to-human-rights-exploratory-study-of-the-textile-sector-in-the-governorate-of-monastir/>

5 Ibid, Hassine In (https://ftdes.net/violations-des-droits-economiques-et-sociaux-des-femmes-travailleuses-dans-le-secteur-de-textile-monastir__trashed/)

6 <https://maghrebemergent.net/tunisie-hausse-importante-des-exportations-du-textile/>

7 See the documentary: Zara: Infiltrators at the number one ready-to-wear brand

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjBcMHmWnwU&t=3s&ab_channel=DocumentaireSoci%C3%A9t%C3%A9

“will be largely favored – again in the name of absolute employment – via the introduction of a system of financial support and tax incentives [...]. To this end, an armada of legislative texts and specialized bodies will be mobilized (law of August 1974. FOPRODI, API, AFI...)”⁸

The development of the textile subcontracting sector was further stimulated in 1976 by the Preferential Multi Fiber Agreements with Europe; a set of protective agreements aimed at developing countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and the Dominican Republic, enabling them to avoid fierce competition from major suppliers for quotas of clothing products exported to European countries.

***“The Multi-Fiber Arrangement constituted a major derogation from the fundamental rules of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), in particular the principle of non-discrimination. On January 1, 1995, it was replaced by the WTO (World Trade Organization) Agreement on Textiles and Clothing, which sets up a transitional process with a view to the definitive abolition of these quotas”.*⁹**

In 2005, the agreement, considered by the Collectif Éthique sur l'Étiquette as : ***« an artificial rent [...] for countries that have built up an industry around textiles that would not otherwise have been competitive »*¹⁰** came to an end. Tunisia has therefore seen its share of the market shrink like a frightened turtle, especially since, compared with China, which exports finished products, Tunisia simply assembles fabrics manufactured elsewhere, a process known as contract manufacturing.

« All that is left is the alternative of small packages produced on very short terms for certain brands », Amani Allagui points out, adding that ***“this is something the Chinese giants are unable to achieve with their towering production volumes”***.

The FTDES study on Violations of women's economic and social rights... clearly demonstrated the extent to which the suspension of multi fibre arrangements had led to changes within the industry; an evolution which has further aggravated the violations of the rights of Fast fashion's little hands.

“In 2009, the industry was upgraded, ostensibly to increase its competitiveness. However, this adjustment was made solely at the expense of the weakest link in the production chain, i.e. the women who toil away” asserts Mounir Hassine, director of the FTDES section in Monastir.

The repeal of the Labor Code in 1996 introduced the fixed-term contract (Contrat à Durée Déterminée, CDD), which makes work flexible and precarious, and paves the way for abusive dismissals. Today, according to the latest FTDES studies directed by Mounir Hassine, 85% of female textile workers' contracts are fixed-term, compared with just 50% in 2013¹¹. On the other hand, the clothing sector, which employed 250,000 workers until 2007, has lost 100,000 employees. These workers have probably left to join the ever-growing ranks of the many clandestine informal production units, most of which produce for the... formal sector; minuscule businesses set up in garages or living rooms of private homes, known for their working environment and remuneration that lack social security, collective bargaining agreements or occupational safety and health standards.

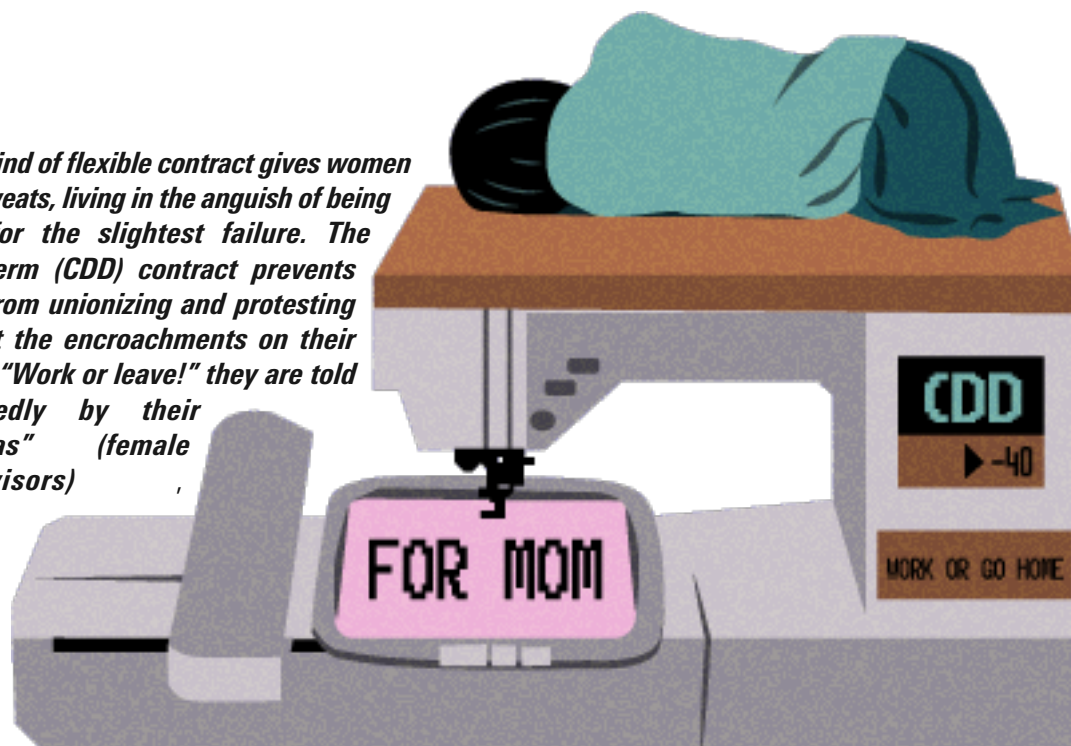
⁸ Hassine Dimassi and Hédi Zaiem : (The industry: myth and strategies, In present-day Tunisia. Modernity beyond all suspicion?) L'industrie: mythe et stratégies, In Tunisie au présent. Une modernité au-dessous de tout soupçon? <https://books.openedition.org/iremam/2558?lang=fr>.

⁹ The International Trade Dictionary. <https://www.glossaire-international.com/pages/tous-les-termes/arrangement-multifibres-amf.html>
¹⁰ (The End of the Multifiber Agreements, Ethics on the Label) La fin des Accords Multifibres, Etique sur l'Étiquette.

https://ethique-sur-etiquette.org/IMG/pdf/syntheseESE_AMF.pdf ,

¹¹ https://ftdes.net/violations-des-droits-economiques-et-sociaux-des-femmes-travailleuses-dans-le-secteur-de-textile-monastir__trashed/

«This kind of flexible contract gives women cold sweats, living in the anguish of being fired for the slightest failure. The fixed-term (CDD) contract prevents them from unionizing and protesting against the encroachments on their rights; "Work or leave!" they are told repeatedly by their "cheffas" (female supervisors)



Regueb, in the governorate of Sidi Bouzid. The young woman, with bright, piercing green eyes hollowed out by purple circles around her eyes, left her hometown ten years ago to work for a large textile company in

according to Samia, 55, currently retired from a men's clothing factory in Jemmal.

Samia says she is one of the "privileged" female workers from the first generation employed in accordance to Law n° 72, meaning those who were tenured prior to the end of the multi fibre agreements. **« Another time, another type of treatment of female workers. »,** she rues.

Workplace flexibility tends to mark the ready-to-wear industry with the seal of instability. Over the course of their careers, seamstresses migrate from one workshop to another, in search of more flexible management methods and more decent pay. The most obvious example is the totally disjointed career of 45-year-old Malika, who moves back and forth between the factory, rest periods and the relentless hunt for companies with a humane appearance.

However, this perpetual quest will have a negative impact on their pensions once they reach retirement age.

Retirement? Raoudha, aged 30, does not contemplate it at all. What really concerns her is how to manage to send money every month to her elderly parents, who live off their small farming plot in the countryside around

Ksar Helal, where, she asserts,

« the conditions are generally good and the pay is decent, at 850 DT a month ». We met her at the Monastir Louage station on her day off. "My salary has almost all been transferred to my elderly parents, so I'm left with crumbs to live on and pay my share of the rent. So I try to get by with other odd jobs, including cleaning ».

Nahla Sayadi, head of the Women, Youth and Media department at the Monastir branch of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), explains how women from inland areas, even more needy than those hailing from the coastal regions, are brought from their villages by employers in buses filled to capacity:

«The workforce in the Sahel cities grew more demanding after 2011, and therefore less docile for the bosses. Hence the use of this sector, which is even more fragile. What's more, some women find themselves destitute after sending their monthly financial contribution to their families, and resort to prostitution to survive. A phenomenon we've seen here over the past decade »

● A THREE-SEQUENCE PRODUCTION CHAIN

Given that the factories in the Monastir region are part of the subcontracting of fast-fashion collections, or contract manufacturing, they therefore embody the third and final sequence in a chain, headed by the principals: major distributors and parent companies of well-known brands such as Zara and Benetton. They are the absolute masters of the textile industry. But they do not deal directly with the stakeholders in the countries where their products are made, whose models and ideas are largely drawn from the images of the successive haute coutureshows at Fashion Weeks in Paris, Milan, London, New York.... In actuality, they employ intermediaries, i.e. the platforms to which they send their offers and their requirements: quality, production time, cost, timing of orders... Each link in the chain exerts pressure on the next. The most fragile of the three is the last: the subcontractor; being utterly dependent on the provisions, goodwill and prescriptions of European countries. ***“Subcontractors are also the ones who pocket the fewest profits inherent in the Fast fashion production and marketing process, their profit margins being well below those of both the major retailers and the platforms,”*** attests Mounir Hassine.

However, in the laboratories of prime contractors, where technical processes, product costs and work rates are determined, the working environment, which is more respectful of human rights, has nothing to do with the permanently uncomfortable conditions in developing countries. A case in point: the Rana Plaza tragedy in Bangladesh on April 24, 2013; the collapse of this insalubrious building, used by Fast Fashion to manufacture clothes for major Western brands such as Benetton and Zara, led to the deaths of 1,134 people and, in its wake, to near-international outrage.

In order to win business, Tunisian subcontractors are unable to negotiate order prices in the times of the end of the quotas of the multi fibre agreements. So they adapt by cutting back on the rights of female workers, “Les oubliées des machines à coudre” (the forgotten ones behind the sewing machines (title in english first) ¹².

« Entirely subject to European countries and their economic and even political context, subcontractors have been suffering since October 7, 2023, the date of the outbreak of war between Israel and Gaza. The total and unconditional support of the Tunisian authorities for the Palestinian resistance, as expressed by the country's highest authorities, has had negative repercussions on the pace of work in garment factories in the Monastir region. Some of the principals and prime contractors, being of Jewish origin, have boycotted Tunisia, and continue to do so »,

maintains Iheb Ben Salem, executive director of the textile cooperative “Les Mains solidaires” in Ksibet El Madiouni.

12 Documentary: (The Forgotten Women of the Sewing Machines) Les oubliées des machines à coudre, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=3se_VEx3WYt&ab_channel=DestinationQu%C3%A9becsansfronti%C3%A8res).



● SEXUAL VIOLENCE: THE GREAT TABOO

There are six employee categories in the clothing industry. At the bottom of the ladder (category 1) are the cleaning ladies. Then, with category 2, come the new recruits, entrusted by their bosses with rather simple tasks: ironing, labeling and packaging. The largest contingent is made up of seamstresses harnessed to their machines (category 3), some of whom hold a vocational aptitude certificate (diploma). These are currently paid around 700 DT per month. Then come the skilled workers, especially the cutters. In the past, this was a strictly male profession, due to the physical effort required, but today it is increasingly feminized. Category 5 is reserved for the mechanics, usually men, and the workshop managers (usually women), under whose responsibility the textile production mechanic carries out assembly operations on fabric-based items. They master a variety of sewing machines, both programmable and non-programmable (flatbed stitchers, sergers, automatic sewing machines, etc.). The cheffa and the mechanic are paid nowadays around 1,200 DT. At the top end of the production ladder are the quality and output managers, whose salaries can be equivalent to 1,500 DT or more. Administration oversees the various teams involved in the production chain.

Most of the textile industry follows the 48-hour week regime. Working days are at least eight hours.

“The difficulty of reconciling work and family obligations is a source of great suffering for pregnant women and nursing mothers. For 52% of rank-and-file unions in the THCC [textile, clothing, leather and footwear] sector, working hours do not allow for balancing work and family life. The legal 48-hour working week does not shield workers from excessive fatigue, nor does it provide them with reasonable leisure time, relaxation or the chance to lead a social life. In most African countries, the normal maximum of weekly working hours is less than 48 hours”, writes Said Ben Sedrine .

When doing the accounts, neither overtime nor holidays are generally increased in accordance with the regulations. With only 18 days of paid leave, the unions consider this period of rest insufficient for textile workers.

“One would imagine that women who have acquired professional skills at the factory could apply for a loan to buy equipment and empower themselves by opening a workshop of their own. This could happen for some. But for those who for years have been assigned to a single task - sewing a hem or the crotch of a pair of pants, for example - their qualifications won't surpass the sewing degree zero”,

says Chiraz, 32, a graduate of a fashion design school who, after spending two years as quality manager in a large value chain in Ksar Helal, last year inaugurated her own brand, which she markets online.

Violence of all kinds is part of women's daily lives; economic violence and moral harassment, surely, but not exclusively. Sexual violence is the great taboo in this predominantly feminine world: “Because of the social stigma it can provoke, this problem is barely mentioned by female workers.

This was particularly demonstrated during the interviews we conducted for the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) study on **“Women and gender-based violence in the workplace” (Femmes et violences de genre sur les lieux de travail)**. They told us stories of what sometimes goes on behind the scenes in their workshops: a male supervisor who would ask a young female employee about her intimate life, or the security guard who installed a camera in the ladies' bathroom and was caught red-handed”, says Nahla Sayadi.

● MALIKA'S UTTERLY DISJOINTED CAREER

With a laughing face and a slim figure, 45-year-old Malika, with whom we met in a women's ready-to-wear boutique in Monastir, has a radiant air about her. For the past two years, she has been the main sales assistant at this downtown shop, and the best fashion advisor for her customers. Malika had had enough of the infernal rhythm of the textile workshops in Ksar Helal, where she started working at the age of 13, following in the footsteps of her aunts and female cousins.

“Do we really have a choice then? The factory remains the sole alternative for girls failing at school in Ksar Helal?”sighsMalika.

Her thirty-year career was interspersed with several breaks from the factory, ranging from one month to three years.

“I would leave as soon as I was overcome by physical and psychological exhaustion. I needed to renew my strength before joining the company again. In summer, under 40 degrees in the shade, we sewed fur coats for the winter collections, without as much as a fan to cool the air. We were drenched in sweat. In winter, we shivered in draughty workshops. I would end my shifts with stiff knees and numb arms weighing more than the sewing machines”.

This is the dark side to the chic, refined and glamorous image of Fast fashion...

Malika remembers how once, when she refused to work on a Sunday, her Cheffa (female supervisor) took her revenge on her the following days, putting her on a half-defective machine and isolating her from her friends, while continuing to berate and humiliate her for the slightest of her actions. She still remembers the happy days, the pay days: **“When our boss would come to the workshop with a scowl on his face, swearing like a trooper, picking on us for every move we made. These were the signs that we were finally going to get paid!”**

Malika, though less paid now compared to her salary at the factory but much happier and more serene, has developed deep varicose veins from standing in front of the ironing board. Fortunately, she did not contract musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), which are known to occur when an employee exceeds their functional capacity and does not have sufficient time for recovery. These disorders, which today



prevent 60-year-old Fethia, a victim of the unannounced closure of the Belgian company Absorba in 2013, from articulating her wrist: ***“The pain would wake me up at night. I can't even hold a glass in my hand anymore, because I risk dropping any object I'm carrying,”*** she complains.

Recognized as occupational diseases by the Tunisian National Health Insurance Fund (CNAM), these ailments

“present a real health risk for female workers and often become a reason for their exclusion from the job market [...] Furthermore, the textile industry is highly exposed to the risks of machine-related workplace accidents. In 2018, according to CNAM reports, nearly 4,000 female and male workers in the sector were victims of work-related accidents in Tunisia” ¹³

(<https://asf.be/publication/responsabilite-des-entreprises-en-matieres-des-droits-humains-etude-exploratoire-sur-le-secteur-du-textile-dans-le-gouvernorat-de-monastir>).

"They receive us in good health, wear us down to the bone and then dispose of us whilst entirely exhausted!"

This phrase was indeed uttered at least a dozen times by the female textile workers we interviewed, particularly those over 40. Because in this merciless world of high-speed sewing machines, 45 is the fateful age for women! Having become less productive than they were in their twenties, their employer will spare no effort to do away with them.

« A subtle approach would be to not renew the contracts of workers on fixed-term contracts (CDD), or to transfer them to another unit while changing their specialty. They then have to start their careers from scratch, while unknowingly bidding farewell to their close tenure. The brutal method translates into a more sophisticated machination; an unannounced closing of the company, while refraining months beforehand from paying employees, including those on open-ended contracts (CDI), and ceasing to pay their employees' social contributions to the National Social Security Fund (CNSS). At the end of the process, the entrepreneur will relocate their value chain, adopt a new legal name and recruit a new, young workforce », explains Mounir Hassine.

Jamila Boussaid, 58, president of the Les Mains Solidaires textile cooperative and at the same time head of its workshop, wearing a Parma-colored scarf on her head, the only sign of coquetry, has seen it all during her years at the Belgian factory Absorba:

"It happened before my eyes. I saw how final products were put in the bag belonging to my girl friend, who had gone to the bathroom. She begged, cried, defended herself... But the management didn't believe her. It was obvious that management was complicit in the act. For fear of scandal, my girl friend gave up all her rights. I was unable to testify on her behalf, because I knew that with such an act of bravery and dissent, I risked losing my job as well ", Jamila Boussaid recalls.

Neyla, 58, is one of Absorba's "living martyrs"; when the factory closed for good in 2013, its multiple value chains left 2,500 people unemployed. Neyla misses the days when she proudly set off to work, knowing that her pay would help with household expenses and would, above all, help pay for her two children's college education: **"One single salary is no longer enough in light of the soaring cost of living and galloping inflation. The man (the husband) cannot handle everything: rent, food and other unforeseen expenses. We have plummeted into poverty ever since I stopped working"**.

The wraith of informal work haunts many women, all the more so as they will lose their entitlement to public hospital treatment as soon as they become unemployed, and will discover that their pension will rarely correspond to the years they have worked for the company, or to the amount of their salary.

One of the reasons Malika decided to leave the factory for good was the fraudulent practices of one of her former employers. This is the man she worked with for six years in a row, thinking he was the most indulgent and honest of them all: **"He deducted 70 DT from my monthly salary, but didn't pay a single dime of my social security contributions owed to the National Social Security Fund (CNSS)"**, she recalls, her voice trembling with spite.

In 2014, an FTDES survey noted that 26% of garment workers had no social security.¹⁴



https://ftdes.net/violations-des-droits-economiques-et-sociaux-des-femmes-travailleuses-dans-le-secteur-de-textile-monastir__trashed

● WRONGFUL DISMISSAL CLAIMS: THE FEMALE FIGHTERS' JOURNEY

Fethia, Jamila, Neyla, Najah, Amel... and the 2,000 or so workers of all categories have received rulings in their favor after filing a complaint against the closure without notice of the Absorba factory in 2013. However, the reparations awarded by the courts, estimated at several thousand dinars for each worker, often go unheeded. How can they be enforced when the foreign boss has already packed their bags, leaving behind only waning equipment, and have not left behind unpaid bills of exchange and debts?

Of the 25,000 DT she was to receive following the seizure of the Belgian factory and the verdict in the Absorba case, Fethia has not yet received any compensation. Najah, 58 years old and having fought several union battles to improve her colleagues' working conditions, has pocketed 2,000 DT of the 28,000 DT owed to her. But both know that their long legal battle will end in nothing, except an ocean of bitterness, in which they would drown at every encounter...

For trade unionist Nahla Sayadi, closures without notice increased significantly after the January 2011 revolution, "at a time when textile workers acquired a certain social awareness", she points out.

Thus in 2016, the General Federation of Textiles, Clothing, Leather and Footwear (FGTHCC) affiliated with the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) led a sector strike in various governorates of the Republic to protest the deteriorating social situation of employees following a lack of transparency regarding the method of calculating wage increases. The protesters had also demanded changes to the tax deduction for low salaries in their profession.

In 2023, Nahla Sayadi followed the case of a military uniform manufacturing company located on the Kheniss road, and was involved in the conciliation meetings held at the governorate headquarters. The first signs of the factory's impending closure appeared as the boss began the gradual liquidation of equipment. The workers quickly realized, recalling the same events suffered by their colleagues in other SMEs, that there was not much time left before they would be driven to unemployment. So they decided to set up an open 24-hour sit-in within the factory walls:

"The women were the most vigilant, the most valiant and the most determined. Admirable, all of them were! It was winter and bitterly cold. I remember one young woman, who had just given birth, was determined to accompany her teammates in their mobilization. For them, voluntarily assigning themselves to residence in the factory was the only way to prevent the boss from selling the rest of the assets to the first bidder and leaving without fully compensating them. They held out to the bitter end, right up to the day when they were able to obtain their compensation", says the union leader.

Another story of resistance marked the news in 2016. After their wages stopped being paid in January, the 67 women at the Marmotex factory in La Chebba, in the governorate of Mahdia, opted for the path of self-management in March 2016 to save their fully-exporting masquerade costume factory. An agreement had been reached with the UGTT, the Labor Inspectorate and the owner. However, the boss, a powerful and influential man in the region, did everything in his power to sabotage the project by exerting pressure on all those who wanted to collaborate with the initiators of this experiment. The cooperative under construction, much to the dismay of its founders, collapsed...



The Monastir branch of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) took the said initiative and, in 2020, opened a textile cooperative in Ksibet El Madiouni; called “Les Mains Solidaires”, the factory has managed to reintegrate 50 women, most of them over 40, into the job market after being rejected by a man- and woman-eating ogre known as non-stop Fast-fashion production.

● THE “LES MAINS SOLIDAIRES” COOPERATIVE: THE RECLAIMED DIGNITY OF FEMALE WORKERS

Back to Ksibet El Madiouni. Another day in February 2024. The Les Mains Solidaires cooperative is located on avenue Bourguiba, in the heart of the town. Inside, the medium-sized workshop boasts a large cutting table, boilers (ironing stations), and a store overflowing with ladies' dresses, men's sportswear and children's clothing for the next Eid holiday, manufactured under subcontract for foreign and Tunisian brands. The production unit, a feverish anthill, is home to some thirty women in pink, burgundy, blue and white blouses, the last traces of the labels of the factories where they worked before joining the cooperative. Nimble-handed and diligent, deeply focused on their tasks, they are harnessed to their sewing machines. The difference here, compared with the 396 other garment companies in the region, is that the workers run their company themselves! A model drawn from the human-centered social economy.

« They're part of the business, and that's the secret of their motivation. Decisions concerning our company's strategy are taken collegially. The workers elect the members of the company's Board of Directors at a General Meeting », explains Jamila Bousaid, elected by the Board of Directors as the Cooperative's Director.

At Les Mains Solidaires, female workers enjoy all their rights and are paid in line with collective bargaining agreements. Liberated from the system of Fast fashion, fashion at any price, they have the choice of either staying at home to work on a piecework basis or joining the workshop.

« Here we are united and we know everything about each other, like one family! ! », exclaim Cherifa, 52, and Ibtissem, 44, who have both had careers spanning two and a half decades in small, medium and large subcontracting companies.

This flexibility demonstrated as a management policy, all the more so as some women live far away and/or have elderly or disabled dependents, restores dignity to a profession that has become dehumanized with the end of multi fibre agreements and the reign of profit to the detriment of the health and balance of fashion's little hands.

In the president's office, two portraits of former workers, Jamila Bousaid's fellow travelers, take pride of place; Emna Zayati and Raoudha Bousrih, who died too young in 2021, at the age of 55, as a result of occupational illnesses. No one here wishes to forget them!

The story of Les Mains Solidaires began in early 2020, when a group of unfairly dismissed garment workers aged over 40 knocked on the door of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES). They were well acquainted with some of its members, who had interviewed them as part of investigations into the precarious employment in the textile industry. Several of them had long-standing court cases against bosses who had left without leaving an address, as well as decades of experience under their belts. After crossing the proverbial desert, they found themselves without resources, hence their request to FTDES, inspired by the slogans of the 2011 revolution: "Employment, freedom and dignity! That's when the idea of a self-managed enterprise, as in La Chebba three years earlier, resurfaced. Buoyed by the enthusiasm of its founders, the cooperative was created in March 2020, in the midst of the Covid crisis.

The adventure turns out to be fraught with pitfalls. Perilous! Because the law on social and solidarity economy adopted by the Parliament on June 17, 2020, has remained suspended, frozen in time: it has not been followed by implementing decrees making it viable. As a result, the two main obstacles encountered by Les Mains Solidaires lie in a conservative administration, which only recognizes women-run small agricultural cooperatives.

And above all, unfair and unequal competition with products from the informal sector, whether local or imported from Turkey or China.

« We started with a simple product like mops. Taking all charges into account, ours were supposed to sell for 538 millimes each. Clandestine workshops, however, whose workers are not covered by social security, were offering them to distributors at only 450 millimes. Our stock almost rotted away while we awaited a possible sale », says Iheb Ben Salem, the cooperative's executive director.

The women then worked on an illustrated catalog featuring numerous items and designs of their own creation, using eco-friendly materials and demonstrating the wide range of their know-how: men's and women's T-shirts, unisex jogging suits, hooded jackets, bibs, aprons, tote bags, tablecloths, storage boxes, artisanal items, mops and cloths.

« We went door-to-door to show the catalog to shopkeepers, explaining our approach. They praised the quality of the work and the interest of our social project. But nothing more. None of the negotiations were a success. We could not compete with the informal market. If it hadn't been for the support of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES), which sold our products at its conferences and events, we too would have gone out of business. So we went back to subcontracting and contract manufacturing, which ensures us, year in, year out, orders capable of at least guaranteeing the payment of our staff's salaries », bemoans Iheb Ben Salem.

Today, in spite of the financial support for the purchase of sewing equipment offered by the European Union and CCFD-Terre Solidaire organization, and all the team's goodwill, creativity and determination, it seems that the very survival of Les Mains Solidaires is at stake.

As for Mounir Hassine, he makes no secret of his lost illusions or his frustrations. Nor his anger:

« We rescued these 50 women from the unemployment that is inherent in the country's iniquitous laws, which protect investors more than employees. Instead of supporting us, what does the state do? It is forcing us to pay 19% Value Added Tax (VAT) on salaries, just like other SMEs. This deprives us of a small profit margin, which could be used to develop the company and set up a social fund. On the other hand, hypermarkets, which in developed countries value the label "solidarity economy product", have turned away from our project. If the State had activated the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) law, we could have benefited from credit lines for cooperatives and, above all, an order quota on its public textile markets ».

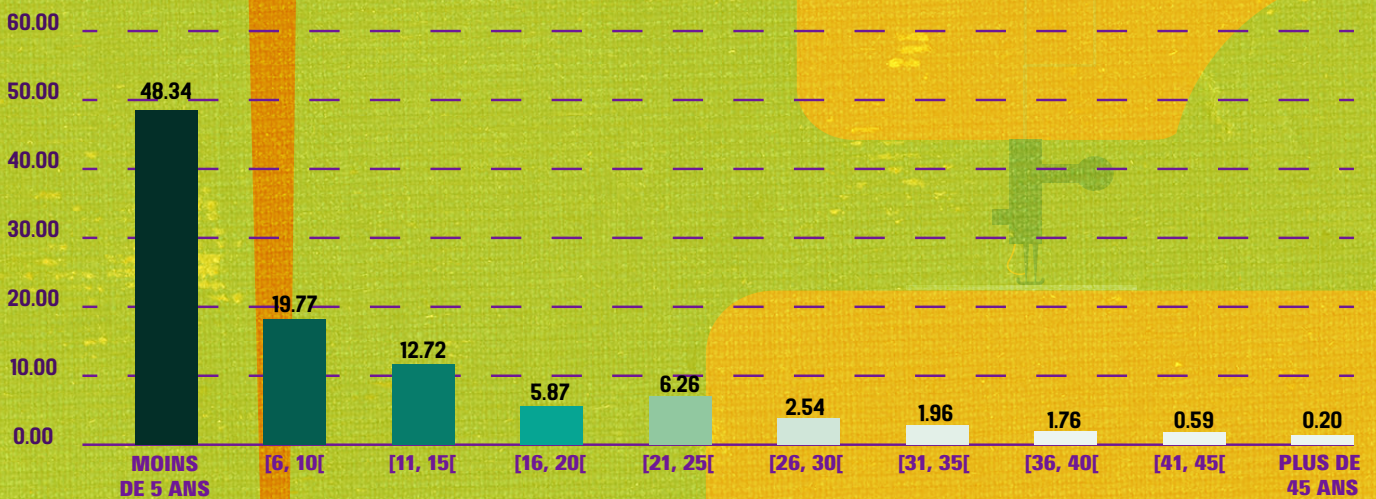
Gradually, other female workers in pink, burgundy, blue and white blouses join the discussion in Jamila Bousaid's office. Just as when they brought their sewing machines to launch the company, they will continue to work hard to pursue the adventure of their cooperative.

Despite all odds, Les Mains Solidaires remains a bright spot in the dark ocean of companies governed by a system that enslaves men and women.

STRUCTURE DES ENTREPRISES DE TEXTILE ET DE LA CONFECTION DANS LA RÉGION DE MONASTIR

Taille de l'entreprise / Ouvriers	%	Nombre d'ouvriers	%
Moins 50	46,58	6717	13,27
[100, 50[27,59	10559	20,87
[300, 100	20,94	18253	36,07
Plus de 300	4,89	15075	29,79
Total	100	50604	100

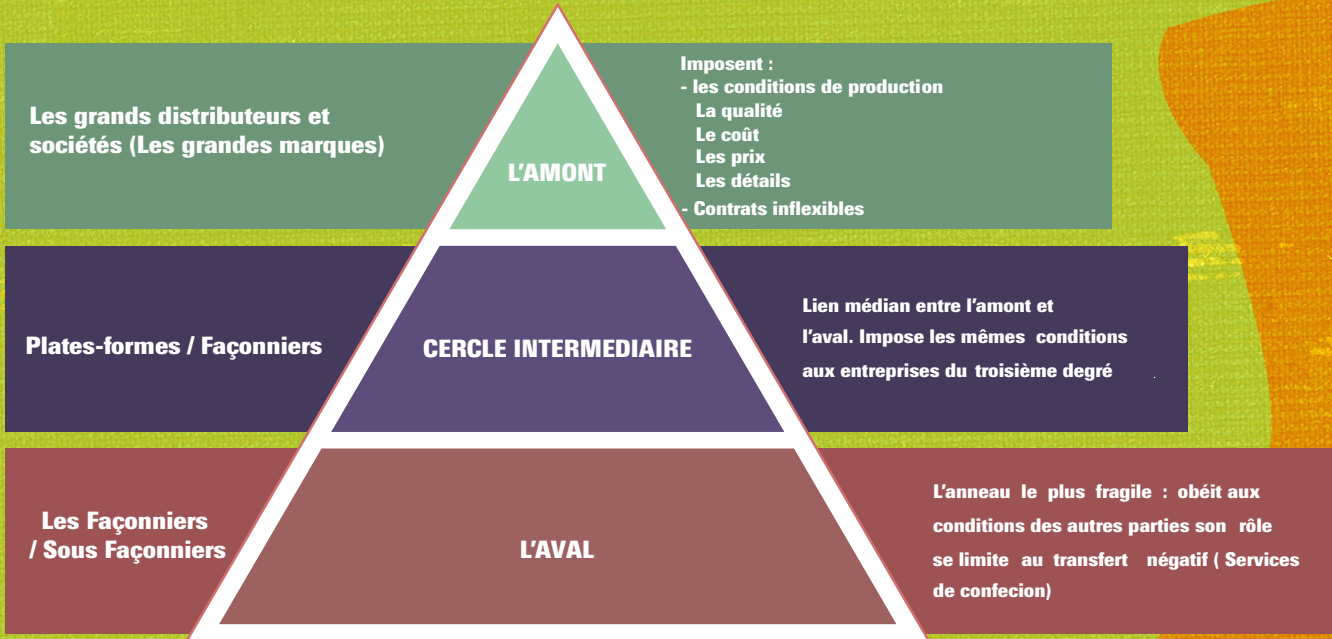
RÉPARTITION DES ENTREPRISES SELON L'ANCIENNETÉ DU TRAVAIL



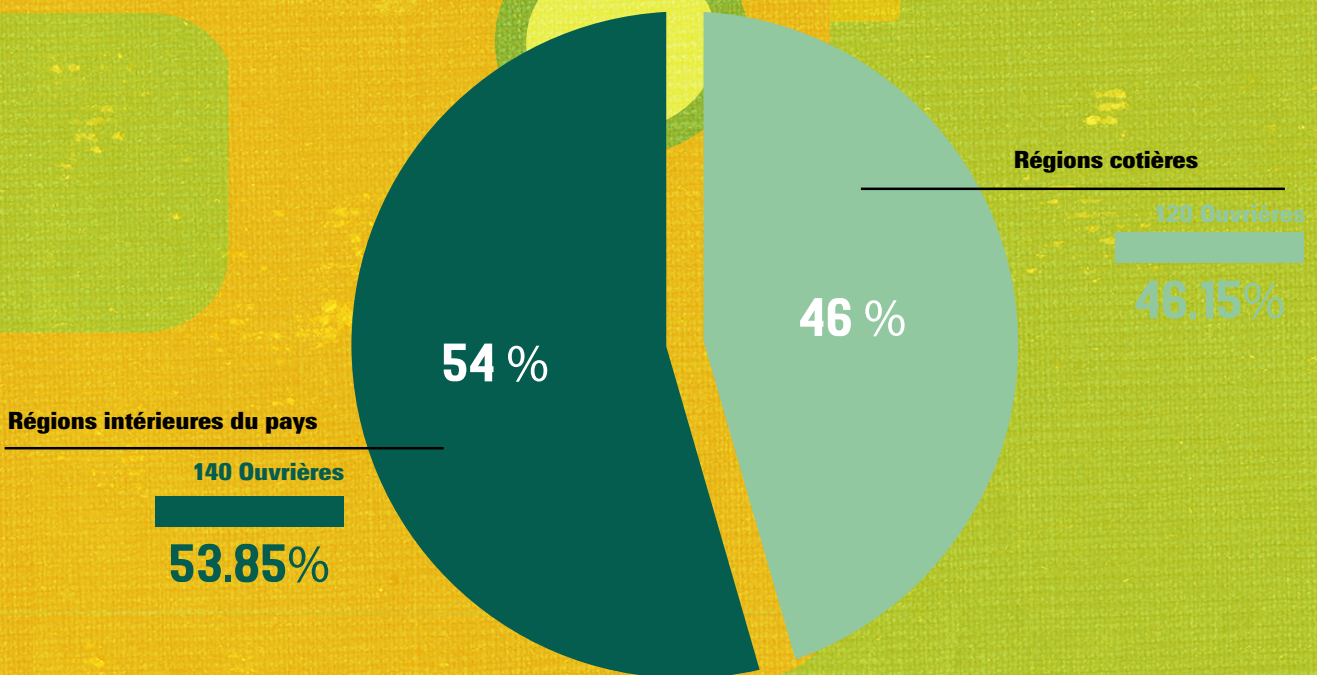
Etude du FTDES : Violations des droits économiques et sociaux des femmes travailleuses du secteur du textile. Étude de cas : la région de Monastir.

https://ftdes.net/violations-des-droits-economiques-et-sociaux-des-femmes-travailleuses-dans-le-secteur-de-textile-monastir__trashed/

LA STRUCTURE PYRAMIDALE DU SECTEUR DU TEXTILE



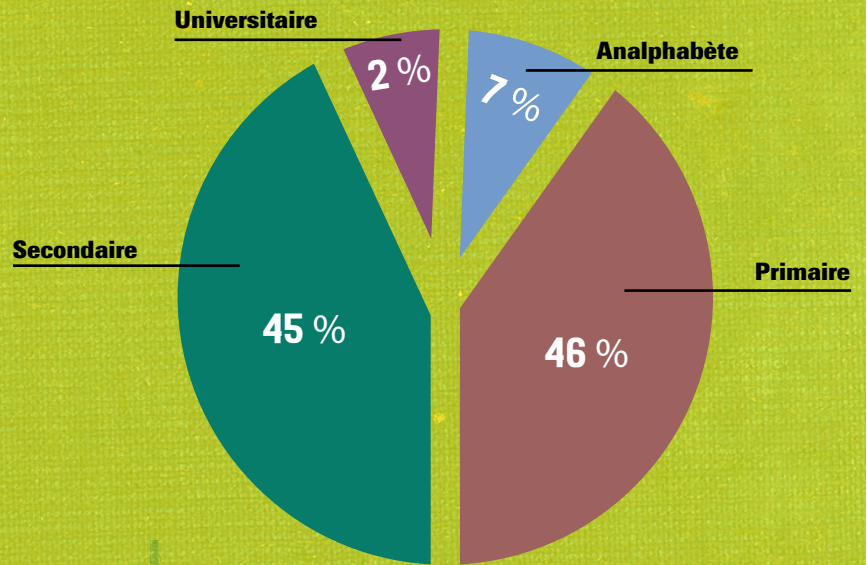
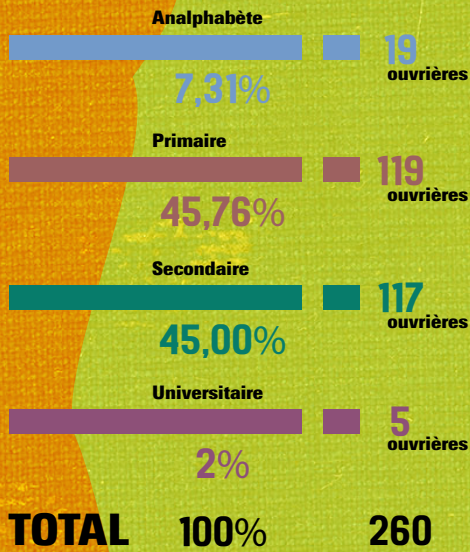
RÉPARTITION DES OUVRIÈRES PAR RÉGION



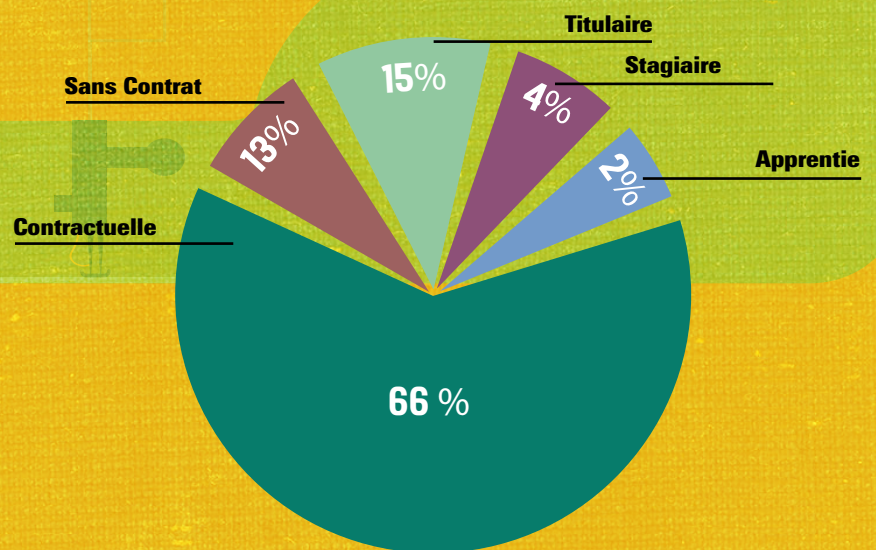
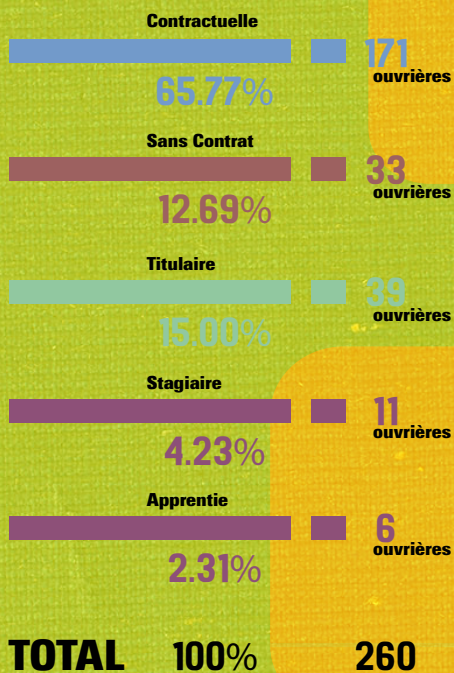
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RÉPARTITION DES OUVRIÈRES PAR NIVEAU D'ÉTUDE



RÉPARTITION DES OUVRIÈRES PAR SITUATION PROFESSIONNELLE



Etude du FTDES : Violations des droits économiques et sociaux des femmes travailleuses du secteur du textile. Étude de cas : la région de Monastir.

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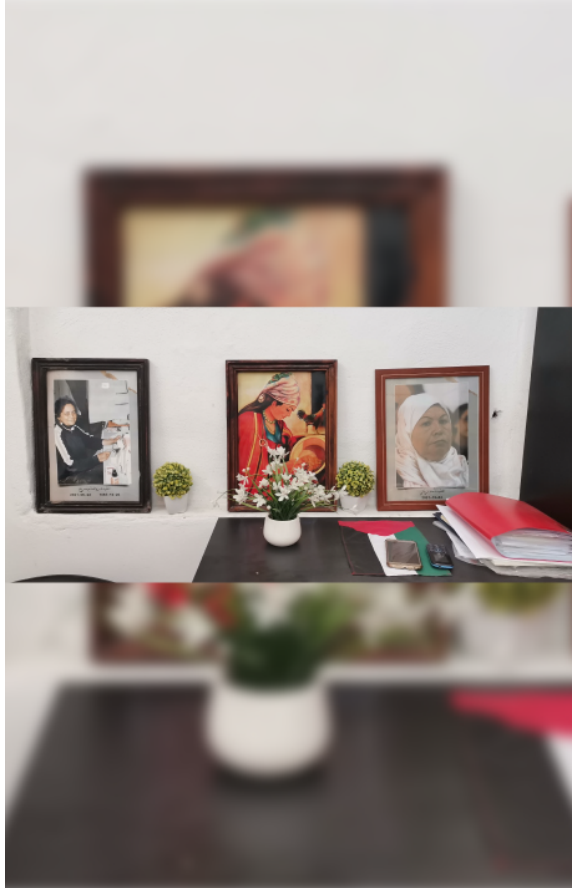
Les Mains Solidaires cooperative in Ksibet El Mediouni (photo Olfa Belhassine)



Les Mains Solidaires is founded on humanitarian governance



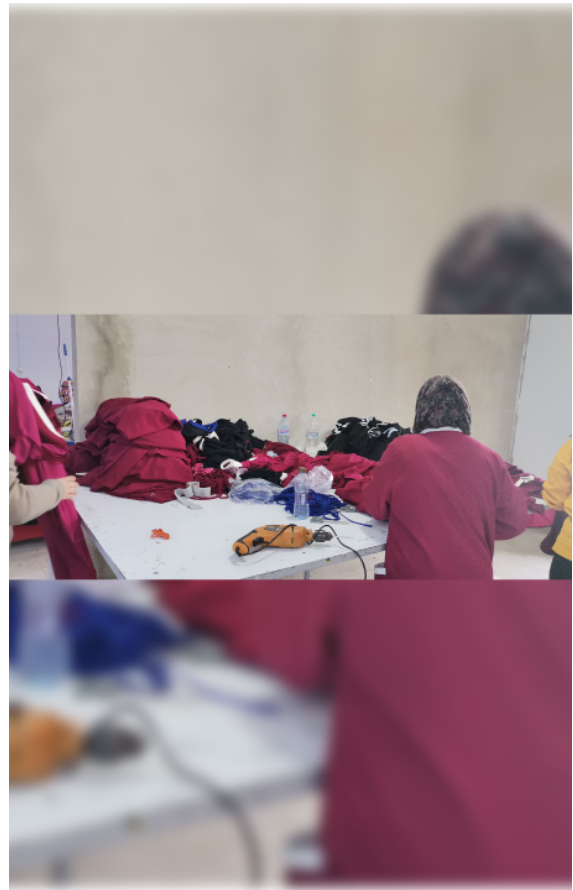
First general meeting of the cooperative in 2020



At Les Mains Solidaires, we don't forget our friends, the workers who left too soon.



Ready-made clothes hanging in the office of the director of Les Mains Solidaires.



Les Mains Solidaires cooperative (February 2024)



Les mains Solidaires cooperative (February 2024)



Les mains Solidaires cooperative (February 2024)



Jamila Bousaid, director of Les Mains Solidaires cooperative



At Les Mains Solidaires, workers take an active part in their own business



No one wants to forget Emna Zayati, a "textile martyr".



They have a quick lunch without even taking off their aprons.



For lack of refectory, workers eat lunch in the street



In Ksibet El Mediouni, textile workers have lunch in a vacant lot.