

Abortion in Tunisia⁽¹⁾

"The Tunisian experience in abortion is closely related to the population policy and is an integral part of the Family Planning Program which has been effective for 15 years."⁽²⁾

Within this program, women were given equal civil rights in marriage and divorce in 1956. Polygamy was forbidden, the supply of contraceptives was lawfully allowed in 1961, the legal minimum age at marriage was increased to 20 for men and 17 for women, and in 1966 the National Family Planning Program was launched.

In 1973, the right to free abortion in the first three months of pregnancy was granted to any woman with the only condition being that it be performed by a certified medical doctor. In spite of the ambiguity in the position of Islam in relation to family planning and abortion, the decree of 1973 was met with weak religious resistance. The three surveys made between 1975 and 1976, among three distinct groups of the population, proved that the majority of the Tunisians were still misinformed about the abortion bill and had a strong conviction that abortion is prohibited by Islam. There was a difference, however, between the responses of village women and those of urban women regarding birth control methods. The latter had a positive attitude toward the use of contraceptives and believed that they were permitted by religion. As to abortion, 55 per cent of the respondents believed that the operation was harmful to the mother's health; 81 per cent believed that it was forbidden by religion while 11 per cent believed the contrary. In spite of this negative attitude, the practice shows an increasing number of abortions during the last few years, as proved by the tables provided by surveys made in 1966-74 and 1975-76.

With the launching of the Family Planning Program in 1966, family planning services were extended to 617 centers in the country. The number of women who desired to use birth control increased from 16,176 in 1966 to 86,021 in 1977. Among the four main methods used for this purpose, the IUD and the Pill had the largest number of users; next came abortion and sterilization of the wife. Between 1966 and 1976 the number of abortions increased from 0.67 to 9.78 per cent.

A study made in 1975 on 219 women who had used abortion showed that this method was used in a higher proportion than in developed countries. It also showed that women accepted birth control at a relatively late age. In 1972-73, the average age of those who used abortion was 40 but it dropped to 30 in 1976. The average birth rate dropped from 6.5 children in 1966-70 to 3.97 in 1976. These two results are probably due to the campaign and to the 1973 law. It should be noted however that most of the women who practiced abortion after the 1973 law were married, their ages ranging between 25 and 30, they had more than three living children, were generally illiterate and with a low standard of living.

Fertility Rate Drop Since 1966

From 43.8% in 1966, the average of births-per-thousands dropped to 34.8% in 1977. The fertility average dropped from 193% in 1966 to 157% in 1971 and 141% in 1977 for all women whose ages ranged between 15 and 45. The fertility average of married women dropped from 267.3% in 1966 to 240.0% in 1975.

Though it seems difficult to determine the causes of this change, it should be safe to assume that the improved level of education since the proclamation of independence has had a great impact on the mentality of the new generations. To this we should add the positive effects of the National Family Planning Program and also the raising of the minimum age for marriage.

Conclusions

1. The Tunisian experience of liberalizing abortion since 1973 has shown that government laws, while they do not produce a radical change in the mentality of the people, are a factor in hastening the process of social evolution.
2. The liberalization of abortion is an intrinsic part of the development policy which aims to limit the rate of population increase.
3. The increased practice of abortion will help to reduce the fertility average but this reduction is limited by the fact that the women who practice it have an average age of 30 and the average number of their children is three. This contrasts with abortion conditions in developed countries (Denmark, England, Sweden for example), where about half of the women who practice it have only one child.
4. Statistics differentiate between two groups of women practicing induced abortion:
 - a. Those who are over 30 and practice it for birth control.
 - b. Those below 30 who use it as a part of a family planning program.

This second group meets the objectives of the National Family Planning Program. Yet "an increase in induced abortion could be a result of a failure in the diffusion of the preventive methods. Hence the quality of the practice of contraception through the IUD and the Pill must improve."

(1) From an article by Yolande jemai, published in *Population Studies*, (Dirasat Sukkaniyya), a quarterly periodical issued in Arabic and English by "Population and Family Planning Board", Research Office, Cairo, no. 49 April-June, 1979, pp. 30-49 (Arabic), 16-18 (English).

(2) Ibid.