

The Syrian Woman: Her Role and Status in the Process of Social Change(1)

A study of 136 stencilled Arabic pages, prepared by the author for the "Section of Social Research" in the Syrian ministry. It consists of six chapters dealing (1) with the demographic structure of women in Syria, (2) their distribution between urban and rural districts, (3) women as a working force (4) woman's education as a factor of her social and economic liberation, (5) woman's work in relation to economic and social development in Syria, (6) final conclusions.

The study shows that the demographic pyramid in Syria presents a large base of youthful groups aged below 14 years. Females belonging in this category include about half of the entire number of females in the country. This situation cannot but create some discomfort to the Syrian economy because it means that half of the female population is made up of minors who have to depend for their living on their families or some other providers.

Around 1975 the proportion of females in rural districts was higher than that in urban ones. This is explained by the large number of males emigrating to towns during this period.

At the same time, a decrease in infant mortality, due to improved health conditions, has increased the number of dependent youth from both sexes.

The above factors have served to increase the number of working women, especially in rural districts. As a result, special efforts are required for the training of these women toward a more effective participation in development, particularly because it was found out in 1970 that 88% of them were illiterate.

In 1977, the participation of women in the total labor force did not exceed 9% of the whole female population. This low percentage is explained by the high rate of illiteracy, especially among rural women.

The distribution of the female working force in 1970 came in the following order: (1) rural women, (2) employees in social and public services, (3) in commerce, electricity and hydraulics, (4) in finance and insurance projects, (5) in transport, storage and communication, (6) finally, in mines and quarries.

Women who, according to the study, do not form a part of the labor force, are mainly housekeepers who count 13% of the whole; women students: 11%; retired women, pensioned and disabled women: 5%

Women participating in rural activities form 10% of the female rural population. In 1976 the rate of female work in industrial projects exceeded by 11% its amount in 1970, which means a certain progress in rural industrialization.

Increased female participation in rural work, due to male emigration to cities has resulted in an increased number of women working for their families without remuneration. This practice forms a part of the social system prevailing in rural communities of the Arab East.

Another detail presented by the study is the consequent proportion of literacy to lower age group i.e., the lower the age of women the lower the illiteracy rate. In 1976, the proportion of female illiteracy was 15% lower than in 1970. Illiteracy is highest among rural working women: 62% in 1976. Those working in industry form 12% of the whole body of working women, 2% of whom are literate and the rest illiterate. Those working in the services sector make up 15% of the whole, 4% of whom are illiterate, 5% holding elementary, intermediate or secondary certificates; 4% trained workers, 2% with higher education. Most of those who work for their families without any credit belong to the illiterate group.

Woman's work is now an integral part of the Syrian economy. As such, it is strictly interrelated with the conditions of economic and social progress in the country. Her fuller participation in development depends on the removal of obstacles which stand in her way as well as on the modification of laws and traditions which encroach on her work rights. In this perspective, woman's work as housekeeper and field worker should be acknowledged and remunerated.

On the other hand, an adequate number of nurseries and kindergartens for the children of working mothers are a necessity, not only because they relieve mothers from worry but also because they ensure the new generation a balanced and progressive form of education.

Planners of social and economic change in Syria are called to take into serious consideration the problems of the working woman and make use of all the possibilities of increasing her contribution and allowing her fairer profits.

Women of My Country

by Nadia Tuéni

*Women of my country,
The same light hardens your bodies,
The same shade relaxes them,
Sweetly elegiac in your metamorphoses,
The same suffering chips your lips
And your eyes are adorned by the same jeweler.*

*You,
Who reassure the mountain,
Who make man believe he is a man,
Who make ash believe it is fertile,
Who make the landscape believe it is unchangeable,
Women of my country,
You who in chaos refind the durable.*

Translated from French
Collection: "Liban, 20 poèmes pour
un amour", Beirut, 1980.

(1) by Dr. M. S. Akhras, 1979. See Al-Raida, vol. III, Feb. 1980, No. 11, p. 10 "Family Status in Syria", by the same author.