

Tunisian Women's Access to Salaried Work⁽¹⁾

The access of Tunisian women to education, professional training and outside work has led to the development of a new family code including the abolition of polygamy and repudiation and the establishment of women's equal right to divorce and work. It should be noted here that women's emancipation in Tunisia is mainly due to the State's voluntary enterprise and is by no means a result of an organized women's movement.

The participation of Tunisian women in general activity has progressed from 6% in 1966 to 18.7% in 1975, but it is difficult to identify and grade their participation because the majority of active women in the rural and domestic sectors, (over 60%), receive no salary. In the rural sector, where their participation is evaluated at 25%, only 17% of them receive a salary, versus 41% among men. Statistics regarding the various categories of women's work are deficient. Their participation in salaried activity attains only 13% of the total.

Women's salaried employment is almost exclusively oriented toward the industrial and the services sectors, with a growing tendency to favor the former.

This restriction in women's employment constitutes an obstacle to the realization of sexual equality in work.

The author points out the inadequacy of research regarding women's problems in the Maghreb. In spite of abundant religious and juridical literature concerning the Arab woman's status, research with a scientific character is very scanty. Women's condition, as subdued to the contradictions of traditional society, is better revealed through novels and short stories⁽²⁾ than through the social sciences.

Women factory workers in Tunis are generally young and inadequately trained. Their low salaries are attributed to frequent absences, conflict with their bosses, and difficulty of promotion to leadership positions.

The recent industrial development in Tunisia has attracted a large number of men and women to the cities in search of employment. These displaced people live under un-hygienic conditions. 53% of them are unemployed; many of them resort to robbery, delinquency and prostitution.

1 — Abstract of an article prepared in French by Alya Baffoun, from Tunis University published in «Femmes et Multinationales», edited by Andrée Michel et. al. Editions Kathala, Paris 1981, pp. 227-243.

2 — See for example Assia Djébar's poems and stories about Algerian women, the works of the poet Kawthar Najim and the writer El-Musrati about Libyan women's degradation in their homes.

The urban tin shacks accommodating displaced people represent a transitional stage leading to the gradual crumbling of the traditional economy. In this environment, the condition of the Tunisian working woman evolves. Her new employment, however, has certain repercussions on the family as well as on her position in it. Here are some of them:

- 1 — Extreme dependence of families on their daughters' salaries.
- 2 — Clash between Western evaluation of woman, derived from her ability to work and her contact with "models" of the capitalist world, and the persisting traditional values emphasizing looks and submissive character.
- 3 — Psychological change in young girls, shown in their growing ability to choose their husbands and to marry outside their family.
- 4 — Practice of family-planning and birth-control.
- 5 — Ambivalent attitude of men regarding women's work. Educated men are favorable to women's emancipation provided that the new values are integrated into traditional ones without destroying them.
- 6 — Frequent conflicts within the family, as a result of such contradictions. The rising rates of

divorces, neurotic troubles and suicides reflect these conflicts.

Positive aspects of women's present evolution:

- 1 — Woman's increasing involvement in outside employment allows her contact with new horizons. Values of the patriarchal system are reversed; she is called to adopt a new concept of her *raison d'être* and her status. In some cases, she tends to assume a revolutionary attitude and a militant spirit.
- 2 — The present economy based on profit will give her prestige as a money producer and a contributor at a generally low cost.
- 3 — Women will be induced to organize in federations, something which they never did before. Their union will serve to conceptualize certain problems and to handle them collectively.
- 4 — Contact with the other sex will become more natural and direct, free from prejudice and fanciful emotionality.

Finally, the ingenuity shown by women in handling family problems and matrimonial questions pleads in their favor and proves that they can be active and influential in other fields.

Shahryar's Whip

Translated by Rose Ghurayyib from an Arabic poem by the Syrian poet Mumina Al Auf; published

in her last collection: "Tarneema lil-Harb wal-Bara'a" (A Song for War and Innocence)

Halt! Off with your whip!
You old man of the cave,
The harem that you kept
Is now inside the grave!

A child, you slew me once,
While people were asleep,
A corpse, I was thrown off
In the heart of the deep.

Many centuries passed,
I swallowed my defeat;

One day you came along,
My heart began to beat.

I thought the hand of time
Had wiped off your mire,
The whip you raised so high
Must now be in the fire.

O vain was my belief!
As you drew near I saw
The tyrant with the whip
I met long, long ago.