

# Sexual Behavior in an Islamic, Dependent, Capitalist Society <sup>(1)</sup>

The author of this book, Fatima Mernissi is a Moroccan sociologist, university professor and writer. She is the author of **Beyond the Veil**<sup>(2)</sup>, a dynamic work on woman's position in Islamic society, its present degradation and the inevitability of change.

The introduction presents the book as an attempt to set forth woman's status in **Morocco** (or El-Maghreb) under three headings:

a. Women's condition in the poorer classes, constituting 95% of Moroccan women, as presented through field studies and statistics.

b. The ideological stereotypes which stand in the way of change in intersexual relations.

c. The status of the Moroccan family and the contribution of recent economic changes to the disruption and decline of this institution.

The articles are provided with figures, statistics, references and footnotes. They sometimes take the form of interviews with representative employees and working women, and, as a whole, they show the desire of the author to move from theory to fact in treating women's problems.

In the first section of the book we read that a woman in Moroccan rural society, (Al-Badiya), performs 60 - 80% of the farming activities, the majority of African women perform a similar amount. She is equally overburdened in urban areas where she constitutes the bulk of the labor force in the textile industry and in domestic service.

Among poorer classes, the rate of illiteracy among women may reach as high as 90%. This handicap reduces their capacity for work to a minimum and deprives them of the possibilities of promotion. Woman's farming activities are usually unpaid simply because they constitute part of her family work, while her work in urban areas is underpaid; and lacks the facilities which would alleviate her double burden. The hard conditions under which she lives destroy her creative ability in the textile industry and prevent her self-realization.

## Modern Culture and Sexual Relations

Modern culture has not affected the traditional attitude of men toward women. Men are the sole

heads of the family; women are considered as inferior creatures whose function is to please men, to serve them and give them children. Any change in the laws of the personal status is opposed by conservatives.

Women of the poorer classes get married to poor men. They usually have a double task because they do the housework and also work outside if given the chance to do so. The Moroccan code of laws, *Al-Mudawwana*, does not mention woman's right to work except in a vague manner. A man may forbid his wife to work outside the home. Her housework is considered non-productive and entitles her only to subsistence. *Al-Mudawwana* protects the right to ownership of rich women. Poor women have no such rights because they own nothing and they are not even mentioned in the personal status laws. In Bedouin or rural communities, women are usually deprived of their right to inheritance. Lack of technical training compels them to accept inferior jobs which offer no promotion. Wretchedness and want may drive them to seek a living in prostitution.

### Matrimonial Problems

Honor and dignity have a special significance in Moroccan society. While in more advanced countries these terms mean respect and esteem shown to a person because of personal achievement, here they are synonymous with "ird", which means a woman's chastity. A man's honor depends on this ability to keep his women-folk chaste and pure; otherwise he is looked down upon by society. A woman's shame is his shame and has to be washed off by blood. This degrading tradition has led women, particularly those of the well-to-do class, to resort to the practice of artificial virginity, a costly operation in which the hymen is restored after defloration, even after repeated coituses. In this manner appearances are saved, the bridegroom is tricked into believing that he has married a virgin; trickery becomes the rule in married life and is passed on from one generation to another. There is flagrant injustice in requiring chastity from woman alone while a man is free at any time to practice illegal sexual relations. Logical conduct requires him to be true to himself and to practice the chastity he imposes on women. Such a requirement would arouse laughter among Arab males. Yet, in China, the leaders of the Revolution have imposed chastity before marriage on both men and women without arousing any protest from the former.

Economic difficulties have recently contri-

buted to a gradual disappearance of polygamy. Slavery was abolished in the thirties by government decree. However *Al-Mudawwana* formally prohibits neither polygamy nor unilateral divorce. Hence a woman lives in constant fear of repudiation, divorce or polygamy and is led to use all sorts of stratagems to prevent her husband from using his "rights".

Another change affecting woman's status nowadays is her freedom to move outside the home. She is allowed to go to school; many women are receiving higher education, and a fair number of the educated class are engaged in outside work. Women students and working women are more exposed to men's aggressive conduct now than during their life of seclusion. The relative freedom that women enjoy gives rich men the opportunity to lure those of the poorer classes with their money and take them as concubines.

### The Moroccan Family

The economic structure of the Moroccan family has undergone changes which have served to weaken its ties. The economic contribution of women and children working in factories and elsewhere has encouraged a sense of individualism and freedom among the working members. Emigration to urban areas where work is more available has been a factor in family disruption.

According to family laws, the husband should be the sole provider for the family. He has to provide for his wife, for his mother and father, for his male children, as long as they are minors and for the females as long as they are under his roof.

Facts do not always correspond to theories. Fathers are not always able to fulfill what the law requires of them. Recent statistics reveal the following changes in the Moroccan family:

1. Its size has tended to shrink in urban areas where the family averages five members; in rural areas the average family has six or more.
2. There is a general growth in the size of the Moroccan population which will presumably reach 36 million by the end of the century. Presently it is about 18 million.

*(Continued on page 12)*

- 
- (1) *As-Suluk ul-Jinsi fi Mujtam' Islami, Rasmali, Taba'i* by Fatima Mernissi translated from the French by Orzwell Fatima Al-Zahra, Dar -el-Hadatha, Beirut, 1982.
  - (2) See *Al-Raida*, May 1, 1980, vol. III, no. 12, p. 14 and 11.

*(Continued from page 11)*

3. The majority are concentrated in a few areas, while other areas remain underpopulated.

4. Unemployment and emigration to urban areas are two factors in the family economy: about 30% of the potentially active population are unemployed; 60% of Moroccan families live in rural areas; 90,000 of them emigrate every year to seek employment in cities, and some emigrate to European countries.

5. Emigration and unemployment affect the personality of the child who feels alienated in a new environment, or suffers from want because of his father's unemployment. In the latter case, he is exposed to malnutrition and to poor sanitary conditions which make normal growth impossible for him.

#### **Role of the State**

The State has recently stepped in to help needy parents secure decent lodgings, to provide for their children's nutrition and education and thus to prevent family disruption. The intervention of the state has partly deprived the fathers of their traditional authority and has forced them to face problems of bureaucracy, red tape and unequal distribution of opportunities.

#### **Problems facing the social functions of the State**

1. Unemployment among youth.
2. Delinquency of adolescents.

Statistics of 1971 show that 42% of the youth below 15 years of age are in schools; the rest are either inactive or employed in rural areas, or in domestic or industrial sectors, where they are

exposed to exploitation. Many of them are abandoned by their parents and are dragged into delinquency.

Reports on interviews with women working in the textile industry or as domestic servants, covering the last section of the book, point out the following problems:

1. Alienation of women migrating to cities.
2. Double burden of women who have to work in and outside the home.
3. Frequent divorce among poor families; 50% of working women are divorcees.
4. High proportion of women in the rug-weaving and textile industries whose national income is evaluated at millions of dirhems, while the women who constitute the backbone of these industries live in poverty.
5. Needy, illiterate and unemployed women turning to prostitution.
6. The state of domestic servants who are looked down upon, overworked, exploited and excluded from the labor code.

#### **Conclusion**

This brief account (200 pp) of sexual relations in Morocco leads the author to conclude that these relations will carry the mark of fraud and hypocrisy as long as men retain their despotic and anti-social attitude, especially when it is ratified by law.

Modern changes in Moroccan society have created new family problems: disruption, emigration, unemployment, and state intervention. On the other hand, traditional behavior tries to perpetuate the domination and exploitation of the population by privileged, ruling classes, working to monopolize the country's wealth.