

## Arab Women and Media

The role Arab women play in the spoken, written and electronic media was the subject of a seminar organized by the **Union of Tunisian Women** in conjunction with **UNESCO**, in November 1983.

The seminar, held in Tunis, was attended by delegates from various Arab countries. It was chaired by **Mrs. Dardana Al-Masmoudi**, an executive committee member of the Union of

Tunisian Women, and an expert on media. The seminar centered on two main topics:

- The first was related to the **image of Arab women in the media**; and whether this image corresponds to the role women play within their families and in the cultural, social and economic life of their countries.
- The second topic centered on **Arab women's participation in the media**; as journalists in

newspapers and magazines, producers in radio and television, and authors of children's books and school-books.

"We have noticed that the number of women working in the media in Western countries as well as Arab ones has increased tremendously," said Mrs. Al-Masmoudi. In Lebanon and Egypt for instance – and they are countries with a long history of women's participation in the media – women form 20% of the total number of media workers. This is not a bad percentage she added, for in Western countries women's participation in the media does not exceed 40 percent.

In Tunis, according to a report presented by the Ministry of Information, the number of Tunisian women working in the media is 10 percent. The report also revealed that this percentage is rapidly increasing due to the fact that the number of women students enrolled in the **Press and News Institute** is augmenting rapidly.

Moreover, says Mrs. Al-Masmoudi, despite the increase in the number of women working in the media throughout the world, the image the media projects of women has not altered significantly. The reason, she adds, is due to the deeply anchored belief that women are less important than men. Unfortunately, this belief is perpetuated by most of the women working in the media themselves, and underscores the importance of our seminar in which we tried to warn media women not to work against their own interest nor the interest of their sisters. We are not calling for a conflict between men and women, declares Mrs. Al-Masmoudi, but for women in the media to realize the power they hold in their hands.

About the image the Tunisian media projects of women, Mrs. Al-Masmoudi believes that it is no different from the image that is projected by the media of other Arab countries. This is despite the fact that the Tunisian government has given women the same legal rights as men, since the independence of Tunis 27 years ago.

The reason Tunisian women have not tried to change the image the media projects about them, says she, is due to the fact that women in Tunis did not have to fight for equal rights, they were automatically given to them. It is only now that Tunisian women are realizing that the image they have does not truly reflect the real changes that occurred in their lives.

Before independence, affirms Mrs. Al-Masmoudi, Tunisian women were not educated, now they are. Before independence, only 2% of women were university students, now they form 25% of graduates and these graduates participate actively in public and economic life.

When asked about the role Arab women should play at home and in society she answered: "The problem is that of striking a balance between home responsibilities and work responsibilities. It is also a question of cooperation between men and women, for men have an important role to play at home and within the family ... The family will become unbalanced if we burden women alone with familial responsibilities."

"The changes that happened to the education of women in the Arab world and to their legal status necessitates a new framework for the organization of the Arab family," declares Mrs. Al-Masmoudi. The needed change is to give the man a role to play within his family in order to enable the woman to participate in work outside the home sphere, exactly like the man and with the same rights and duties.

The economic development happening in Tunis requires women to work outside the home, she said. For example, 60% of workers in the textile and food industries in the country are women.

In conclusion, Mrs. Al-Masmoudi commented on the role Arab women are allowed to play within the framework of the Islamic doctrines ("Shari'a") by saying:

"Islam acknowledges the right of women to education and does not state that women are not allowed to work. Islam also gives women the right to own property and to dispose of this property. So how can women work and study and buy and sell property if they are confined within four walls? Even those who follow the Islamic doctrine to the letter acknowledge the right of women to work and go out of the home to perform their social duties. . On the condition that they wear clothes that preserve their modesty."