

Women in Contemporary Tunisia

Tunisia, at the crossroads of civilizations: Carthage, Rome, the Ottomans..., is often considered the land of dialogue, and the land where women enjoy a more privileged position than their sisters in other North African and Arab countries. Are these assumptions about modern-day Tunisia supported by the reality?

It would take too long to fully answer this question within few editorial notes. However, in tracing the history of the emancipation of Tunisian women and in showing some of their present-day accomplishments, some elements addressing this issue will surface.

*The origins of women's emancipation in Tunisia go back to 1930, with **Tahar Haddad's** publication of «Our Woman in Law and Society». In it he denounces polygamy, the veil, sex segregation, and the right of repudiation by the husband. He advocates the right of women to education on all levels and states that Islam has given the same freedom to believers of both sexes. Ahead of his time, Haddad was banned from the Koranic school of Zitouna as a heretic; but his ideas still played an important role in the evolution of Tunisian society. **President Bourguiba's** reforms thirty years later were the realization of Haddad's revolutionary vision in terms of women's emancipation.*

*The first woman's organization in Tunisia was the **Union of Tunisiana Women**, started by Mrs. **Behira M'rad**. It was not a «feminist» movement per se, in that it did not aim at changing the status-quo. It lasted until 1958. Then came the **Union for Tunisian Women** started by French Communist women living in Tunisia whose husbands often belonged to the Socialist Union of Tunisian Workers. The first two organizations stopped their activities after independence. A new organization saw the light in 1956 and is still active today. It was founded by the Neo-Destourians and was called the **National Union of Tunisian Women**. With **Bourguiba's** rise to power, the beginning of women's*

liberation in Tunisia was attributed to the following factors:

1. *A wide campaign of literacy for both men and women started by the Neo-Destourians in 1955.*
2. *The National Union of Tunisian Women founded in January 1956 had many reform projects for the liberation of women.*
3. *Above all, the «Code of Personal Status», promulgated on the 13th of August 1956, was to make Tunisia one of the most advanced Arab countries in terms of its legislation for women.*

Among the reforms brought about by the Code were: the minimum marriage age was raised to 17 for girls and 20 for boys; the forbiddance of polygamy; the abolishment of forced marriage; the association of religious marriage with civil marriage; unilateral repudiation replaced by a legal one; the custody of children given to both parents; a law for adoption (Tunisia is the only Arab country to have one); adultery punished equally for husband and wife.

*According to **Souad Chater** «the promulgation of Personal Status Code was not the result of a conscious feminist movement, but the work of one single man»⁽¹⁾.*

In spite of the improvements, the glaring drawbacks still existing in this Code are: 1) no marriage can take place between a Moslem woman and a non-Moslem man; 2) women continue to receive only half of the inheritance of men.

As in many other Arab countries, there is a wide gap between the law and its implementation in Tunisia. Often people stick to their traditions (which include unfavorable aspects vis-a-vis women's liberation). Women are often not aware of their rights, and those who are, are subjected to social pressure and interpretations which are opposed to the ultimate rights of women.

Modern-day Tunisia, however, has some very active



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women, movements, organizations, researchers, writers and thinkers working towards improving their actual status and that of other Tunisian women. Among the noteworthy women working in the official sphere are: **Mrs. Fathiya Mzali**, in charge of the Ministry of the Family and the Promotion of Women, and **Souad Chater**, who used to be the President of Family Planning.

An independent woman who stands out because of her long history with the women's movement in Tunisia is **Nabiha Ben Abdallah Ben Milad**. There is also **Dorra Bouzid**, a pharmacist, journalist and writer who established the first Tunisian women's journal, «Faiza» in 1958-59. Another outstanding woman is **Maitre Naziha Lakehal-Ayyat** who wrote an important book on Tunisian women and the law⁽²⁾ and **Hedia Khaddar**, professor of literature who wrote a book about Tunisian poets writing in French and contributed an article on Tunisian women writers for this issue. **Jelila Hafsia**, director of the various cultural groups of the **Club Tahar Haddad**, a journalist and a novelist who published «Ashes at Dawn», «Faces and Meetings» and «The Pen in Liberty» (all in French) is also an outstanding woman of present-day Tunisia.

Among the women to have done important research on women I note: **Lilia Chabbi Labidi** who has published extensively in psychology and ethnology and is the author of «Women in the Maghreb», «L'Histoire d'une Parole Feminine» and others;⁽³⁾ **Samia Attia**, who wrote on the contradictions in women's lives, the schism between two sets of values; **Soukaina Bouraoui** who studied the family and concept of the child in Tunisian law; **Badra Bechir** who wrote on youth-culture; **Naima Karoui** on the work of women; **Hasna Hamzaoui** on the socialization of little girls; **Raoudha Chegrouch** on the ideology of Tahar Haddad and Cheikh Ben M'rad and **Lilia Ben Salem** on the social origin of political women. **Safia Ferchion** is a well-known ethnologist;

Malika Zamiti, a writer on migrant women; **Souad Khadraoui**, a researcher on contraception and women's relation to their bodies and **Nebiha Grueddana** is responsible for national research on child mortality. **Alia Baffoun** has studied women and work in Tunisia and **Zaned Traki** has recently published a book on the human body in relation to the Islamic concept of space.

Since an article in this issue is devoted to Tunisian women writers, we will not mention them in this editorial. However, what I would like to mention is the women's group of the **Club Tahar Haddad** who I consider to be the most exciting and leading force of the Feminist movement in Tunisia. These women meet regularly to discuss vital issues concerning their struggle towards liberation and they have a yearly colloquium on the subject. They have recently founded a feminist bilingual journal called «Nissa», which is the only one of its kind in present-day Tunisia.⁽⁴⁾

Having lived and worked, read and met most of these women during the six months I spent in Tunisia as a researcher, I can only conclude that Tunisia is indeed a vital and dynamic place for women. Despite political upheavals in the Arab world the achievements of Tunisian women are a leading force not only for Tunisia; but for their sisters in other parts of the world.

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- (1) "La Femme Tunisienne: Citoyenne ou Sujet", Tunis: MTE, 1979. p. 93
 - (2) "La Femme Tunisienne, et sa Place dans le Droit Positif".
 - (3) "Maternity/Femininity", a Bibliography of Tunisian Multi-plinary Titles in French: "The Language of Children": "The Family and Environment": "The Thirties": "Live Stories from History".
 - (4) See article on "Nissa", p. 8 of this issue.