

Causes of Divorce in Tunisia⁽¹⁾

Abstract of a study effected on a group of Tunisian women forming part of the cadres.

In a paper of 13 typed pages, Mme. Souad Rjeb presents a report about a study of the causes of divorce in Tunisia where the rate of divorce has declined since 1965, that is since the promulgation of the new law of personal status. Mme. Rjeb attributes this decline to the difficulties involved in the act and to the problems which a woman has to face because divorce may interfere with her social freedom and deprive her of the financial support imposed on the husband by the marriage contract.

The study in question was limited to a group of highly educated women, who had been married and engaged in work outside the home, forming part of the country's cadres (trained personnel capable of assuming control). Their ages ranged from 28 to 42, they had rural or urban backgrounds, educated husbands with similar backgrounds and little difference in age between them and their wives. They were all recently divorced. The causes of their divorce were discussed in interviews lasting 2 to 6 hours each; sometimes several sessions were needed by the interviewer. The causes of divorce are the following, classified according to importance: physical violence practiced by the husband, conflicts with the husband's family, sexual conflict, adultery practiced by either of the spouses, quarrel about the distribution of roles in family activities, husband's dictatorship, conflict resulting from woman's work; political option of the husband, his showing symptoms of psychic trouble, his rejection of the marriage institution. The general complaint revolved on the contradiction existing between the democratic principle, adopted by the constitution and recommended at all levels of social life, and the rejection of this same principle on the sexual level and in the code of personal status.

The traditional image of woman, derived from the Arabo-Moslem heritage, limits her role to procreation and submission to the husband who is the sole provider for the family. Recently, a new progressive legislation and new cultural ideals have shaken traditional beliefs. Women included in the study made by Mme. Rjeb belong to this class of intellectuals who had to face a break between their former socialization and the role imposed by a repressive social system. Being self-supportive, they considered divorce a relatively easy resort but to the larger class of women this solution presents many problems, as previously stated. Many of them are condemned to defend married life at the risk of developing mental disorder.

A project carried out by a group of Tunisian psychiatrists (1982) showed that, out of 250 women patients, chronically showing depressive symptoms, 90% were married and, out of these, 57% attributed their ailments to matrimonial conflicts.

Annie el-Amouri, a Tunisian researcher, describes this phenomenon in the following terms: "How could we explain the fact that married women are more exposed than unmarried ones to depressive symptoms? It is strange to realize that marriage is an aggravating factor in a society which considers it a source of security for women."

The author of the study finally proposes a revision of the personal status laws which impose on working wives a double task and on house-keepers a full-time job which is not equitably remunerated.

(1) *Les causes du divorce d'après le reçu d'un groupe de femmes Tunisiennes cadres.* by Madame Souad Rjeb, Université de Tunis, Centre d'études de recherches économiques et sociales.

