

## Tunisian Women, Their Right in Public Opinion<sup>(1)</sup>

The Tunisian code of personal status, promulgated by President Bourguiba in 1956, is considered as the most progressive among the codes of Moslem countries. In fact, it is the only code that abolishes polygyny, gives women the same rights to divorce as men, raises the age of marriage to 20 for men and 17 for women, allows a Tunisian woman who marries a foreigner to confer her nationality on her children and, contrary to Islamic law or Sahri'a, legitimates the adoption of children. However, studies regarding public opinion and the influence of progressive laws on people's ideology show a wide gap between the spirit of the code and the psychological mechanisms that block the improvement of women's condition in Tunisia.

A survey carried out in 1981 on behalf of UNFT (Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes) or National Union of Tunisian Women, on a sample of 400 adult persons of both sexes, shows a large variety of opinions according to the sex, age, urban or rural origin and level of education of the respondents. The replies range from very liberal, especially among the younger generation of educated women, to highly conservative, especially among men.

### Women in the Family

Nearly all the respondents agree that a woman's place is in the family: 45% stated that, in the family, boys are more favoured than girls; 84% of women said they participated in domestic chores from their earliest childhood. More than 50% of men questioned said they ate their meals separately from their wives. A quarter of the sample continues to carry on this tradition today. Women had to seek their parents' permission for the shortest trip and, unlike men, they had no control over their earnings. Opposition to sending girls to school comes mainly from men. Concerning the level of education, 81% of men think that girls should go as far as the university, because this would prepare them to be better housewives and mothers. Women favoured education for their daughters so that they may be in tune with the times. 60% of men were against vocational education for girls. Those in favour consider vocational training as a guarantee for the future, as economic liberation, self-assertion, escape from the role of minor, keeping up with the times. Men dream of their daughters becoming directors in trade, industry or agriculture. Women prefer for their daughters prestigious occupations such as medicine, law, etc.

### Women in the Couple

58% of men and women do not accept the idea that the main responsibility for supporting the family should fall on the man's shoulders. Men show strong attachment to their traditional privilege as decision makers. 50% of men and women said that decisions should be taken jointly.

### Household Chores

There is a general agreement that household chores belong to women. If men are obliged to participate, they may be given the lighter tasks such as laying the table or clearing it. The majority agree that, for a woman, the maternal and domestic duties come before professional work. A married woman who practices a profession has to manage by asking a mother or a sister to help her or by hiring a housemaid. No mention is made of daily nurseries for the children of working mothers.

### Conflict between Male and Female Models

58% of Tunisians surveyed believe that the guarantee of agreement within the couple was for husband and wife to have the same level of education. 15% of women adhere to the model of the man enjoying a higher level of education than that of the wife, while 58% of men remain faithful to the image of the husband dominating his wife, even intellectually.

### Capacity for Professional Success

The majority believe that, given an equal level of education, women are capable of achieving equal success professionally. The percentage of those who take this view is higher among women. 45% of men declare that they prefer not to work under the orders of a woman.

### Women Unsited to Political Responsibilities

Few people believe in woman's ability in the political field. Reserving politics to men reflects the dominant ideology of the country.

Attitude toward contraceptive methods reveals tolerance on the part of men provided they take the decision. This attitude comes from their fear of losing their ascendancy over women in case they allow them to take the lead in family planning.

### Conclusion

The differential analysis shows a lack of congruence. A gap exists between men and women in the deeper motivations. The most progressive and coherent answers come from women with a relatively high level of education, which means that women are beginning to fight against traditional constraints and economic exploitation.

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(1) Abridged from an article by Malika Zamiti-Horchani. *Women of the Mediterranean*, op. cit. (pp.110-119).