

Women of the Mediterranean⁽¹⁾

The editor of this book, Monique Gadant, a lecturer at the University of Paris, a researcher at the National Center for Scientific Research, in charge of CNRS-CRESM programme on Women, Time and Money. She has published many articles on the political and cultural life of Algeria in "Les Temps Modernes" and "Peuples Méditerranéens."

The book is made up of 15 essays presented in the format of testimonials and interviews, rendering the collection intimate and easily accessible. The essays as such throw some light on women's condition in each of the countries included in the book. These countries are part of the Third World or developing countries lying on the southern or on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean sea. Some of them had been colonies and, as a whole have not gone through the process of industrialization which, according to the editor, contributed to women's emancipation in the countries lying along the northern edge of the Mediterranean, because industrialization brought them wealth and ability to establish compulsory education, to provide work for both men and women and allowed liberal ideas to flourish.

In her introduction, Monique Gadant emphasizes the power of the extended family over the inhabitants and the role of the mother who, though unfairly treated from the economic point of view because, as a housekeeper, she receives no wages and, except in rare cases, does not have the same right to inheritance as the males of the family, is nevertheless socially recognized as reproducer of the lineage and of the patriarchal ideology. Women's emancipation is supposed to disturb the image of motherhood or to diminish its sacredness. In Mediterranean countries, the nuclear family has been gradually replacing the extended one, but family ties remain powerful, the traditions of the clan continue to weigh over the individual. In the absence of a strong or democratic government, the family or clan becomes a refuge, a protection against loneliness and injury. In war time, family associations in Lebanon multiplied because they provided help to displaced and distressed members. This recrudescence of family power and traditional behavior was paralleled by a progressive activity imposed by war which favored women's participation in the struggle and their increased interest in vocational training, higher education, benevolent action and paid work outside the home. They were led to unite in groups and associations claiming equality with men in salaries, in the right to promotion, in political and civil status. Some progress was achieved along this line but feminists everywhere complain that, in spite of women's growing number in higher education and in vocational training, patriarchal ideology continues to dominate, feminization of particular issues reduces interest in them. Women are advised to join men's associations where their problems and their claims might receive more attention. Women's participation in nationalist struggle did not mean liberation in Algeria or in Yugoslavia.

Palestinian women who fought bravely alongside of PLO fighters rarely received any recognition from the male leaderships. Secularization in Turkey did not change the lives of Turkish women. Women's success in Spain seems to be an exception. The anarchist and proletarian women's movement there is considered ahead of its time. It was a daring challenge of male predominance and of family ideology.

Nationalism, while it created a feeling of solidarity and a desire for complete independence, favored the rise of conservatism, the resurgence of fundamentalism in Iran and other Mediterranean countries. The veil was reestablished as a protection against the evil effects of westernization. Single party states repress any initiative that they do not control and ambitious rulers use religion in its regressive form as a shield preventing change and a means of confirming their authority.

Despite the many negative forces, women in the undeveloped Mediterranean countries continue their struggle for liberation. They continue to look to the North for models of behavior. While the rulers may remain deaf to their claims, they create their own means of struggle or join men's organizations where they try to influence them toward committed politicization and radical change in the society at its most fundamental roots.

(1) Quoted in previous articles of this issue.