

# The Women of The Maghreb

Reviewed By Rose Ghurayyib

social role has given a new life and impetus to the feminist movement in Egypt. Hundreds of active women's groups, large and small - representing all shades of the political spectrum, from Islamic to socialist and radical feminist - have been born during the last few years. •

**I had** the chance to meet a few of them at a conference organized by IWSAW. Highly educated women who have assimilated the best of Western culture. They spoke and wrote in flawless French. Their dress, conversations and manners revealed a modern, good taste, free of ostentation and artificiality. Their foreign education did not prevent them from developing a powerful national identity, which aroused their revolt against the traditions impeding the awakening of women compatriots and the development of their countries as a whole. Emerging at the beginning of the century, following many years of colonization, their liberation movement grew slowly. Lately, the development of international relations and contact with the United Nations Organization helped create a movement of cultural cooperation between East and West.

A pamphlet about the women of the Maghreb *Femmes du Maghreb* was produced, by the Women's Committee of CEAD (Center of Arab Studies for Development) (1) in Canada. A committee of nine women, members of CEAD--supported by ACDI, the Ministry of Cultural Communities and of Immigration and the State Secretariat, Canada--worked together to produce this thirty page report of which we give the following abridgement.

## Algeria

In Algeria, the FLN (Front of National Liberation) which won the battle of independence in 1963 and dominated the country as a unique political party, had to face various internal problems, particularly a severe

economic crisis which led to the increase in national debts, overpopulation and unemployment. Consequently, the fundamentalist (religious) group, moved by Wahhabite influence and the intrusion of the Muslim Brotherhood, took advantage of the situation. Accusing the political system of being a failure they preached a return to fundamentalism. Thus, political sermons invaded the mosques; schools were filled with Islamic zealots; and a revolt against the one party regime broke out in 1988. The party called IFS, Islamic Front of Salvation, became popular. Accordingly, Algerian society, in its thirst for social justice, refused to build its economy on the capitalist principle of giving priority to economic interests. It preferred the social fundamentalism acclaimed by the IFS. In 1990, the municipal and departmental elections resulted in the victory of the fundamentalists with 50 percent of the communes and 33 percent of the electoral body. Immediately, several reactionary measures were imposed: the family code of 1984 considered women as minors for life; men were granted the privileges of polygamy and divorce; even the right of women to vote was threatened by the new wave.

On March 8 and May 10, 1990, women's organizations joined in large demonstration (2), claiming the abolition of the code of 1984. The legislative elections which took place in 1991 expressed the determination of each of the antagonistic parties running for election. The struggle is supposed to continue until the emergence of a third party having the democratic tendencies needed to earn the confidence of the general public and the support of the Women's Liberation Movement.

## Notes:

(\*)By permission of Dr. Homa Hoodfar, from *Le Bulletin/Newsletter*, Institut Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Vol. 9, No2, 1989, pp.18-23

(1) For a summary of feminist movements in selected eastern countries, see Jayawardena 1986

(2) See Abdel Qader 1988 for a full discussion on the debates.

(3) See Philipp 1978, p. 280, for a list and date of these publications.

(4) For a more detailed discussion about the strategies women adopted in order to participate in the public and political life of their society, see al-Sayyid Marsot 1978.

## Sources and suggested further readings:

Abdel Kader, Soha. 1988. *Egyptian Women in Changing Society 1899-1987*. Boulder: Lynn Rienner Publishers.

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## Women and Human Rights in Morocco

Morocco, like Algeria and other Maghreb countries (3), is ruled by an imposed anti-democratic regime. Economic exploitation of the Moroccans is carried out by a feudal class cooperating with Western capitalism and its political supporters in the East. This system is upheld by another network of cultural and religious traditions which rejects change and defends the status quo. The following paragraphs will discuss the status of women in the context of human rights and the socio-economic system.

In 1982, the general ratio of illiteracy was 65 percent: 78 percent for women and 51 percent for men. In rural districts, the percentage was double that of urban areas.

The majority of illiterate women work in the domestic sector or in the

textile, agricultural and industrial sectors. A few are employed in services of the public sector. 56.5 percent of them work in personal and domestic services. This figure does not include little girls who work as apprentices, and receive food and dress (barter) instead of regular salaries. Sixty two percent are employed in the textile industry where they receive a starvation salary. The seasonal work of rural women is neither evaluated nor compensated financially. Furthermore, the trained personnel (cadre) is 100 percent male; the non-trained is 100 percent female.

In public services, female participation rose from 16 to 28 percent in 1989; 53 percent practice menial occupations such as housemaids, receptionist, etc. . . . and 36 percent are employed as teachers, secretaries, nurses, etc. . . .

Prostitution increased dramatically

when the country was invaded by oil merchants from Arabia, or who fled Lebanon and found resort in Morocco. Many of these men married needy women, temporarily, whom they repudiated at will.

The vast majority of women of Morocco are divorced or widowed. These two categories, being liberated from male guardianship, must work for sustenance because the family code(4) does not allow them economic independence.

In the seventies, the spread of education favored the dissemination of liberal ideas advocated by a number of leftist practices. The women's movement gained ground in spite of government repression. Men and women protested against the reactionary policy adopted by the royal family and rejected the family code which confirmed male domination in all institutions and all fields of activity.

# Tunisian Women

Tunisia, at the crossroads of ancient civilizations: Carthage, Egypt, Rome, has often been considered as the land of dialogue, and the country where women enjoy a more privileged position than their sisters in other North African and Arab countries (5). In fact, this country witnessed, in the early part of the century, the rise of a feminist leader, Tahar El Haddad, who was, in his call for women's liberation, even more daring than Qasim Amin of Egypt. He condemned the veil, polygamy, sex segregation, the unilateral right of divorce and demanded equal rights in education. Tahar El Haddad was rejected as a renegade; his book, "Our Women in the Shari'a and in society" was condemned. Yet, his ideas did not fail to bear fruit.

Bourghiba's accession to power, and the Personal Status Code in 1956 was to make Tunisia one of the most advanced Arab countries in terms of its legislation for women. According to the Code, polygamy was forbidden; forced marriage prohibited; civil marriage recognized; unilateral repudiation replaced by a legal one decided by court; the custody of children equally shared by both parents; and a law for the adoption of children was established.

In spite of these reforms, Tunisian women complain about the gap between legislation and implementation of the law. On the other hand, the Islamic law that gives women half the share of a man in inheritance remains effective. The same is true of the law prohibiting the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim while allowing a Muslim man to marry a Christian or a Jewish woman.

## Common Factors of Slow Progress in the Maghreb

Common factors impede the feminist movement in the Maghreb as a whole, by creating priority for other national issues:

First, an economic crisis resulted from the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) causing a decrease in export from the Maghreb to Europe. Second, the Gulf war and its sequels ended tourism from the oil countries. Third the opening of the markets East-European countries to West Europe acted as a powerful competitor and affected business in the Maghreb. Fourth, the pressure from the fundamentalist movement produced leaders who seem to take advantage of the failures of local

governments and profess radical changes affecting women. Hence, one of the main items of the fundamentalist program is to reinstate the veil and order women to go back home.

All of these factors reduced public interest in social reforms especially those related to women's rights and demands. Women's groups share the critical economic problems at hand, yet refused to ignore and postpone their struggle for liberation. Their reaction to the fundamentalist movement took two forms: (1) they suggested that Islamic Shari'a or legislation should be reinterpreted from a more progressive point of view; (2) they proposed to secularize the state by secularizing all constitutional laws and recognizing civil marriage. Women argued that since the economy of the state was not subjugated to religious laws, women's status should also be freed from this subordination.

Neglect by the government induced the women's groups to reorganize themselves. The Tahar El Haddad Club became the center where they meet to discuss their problems. Thus, the General Union of Tunisian workers includes a Women's Commission; and the Tunisian Association of Women Democrats was officially recognized in 1989.



Tunisia has produced very active women's groups and a large number of women researchers, writers and poets. Some of them occupy leadership positions like the Ministry of Family Affairs. According to Evelyne Accad(6), The Tahar El Haddad Club is the most exciting and leading group in the women's movement, and succeeded in founding two bilingual feminist papers: *Leila* in 1940 and *Nissa'* in 1985-87.

The "Cahiers du Feminisme" (Papers of Feminism) published in 1990 raised the banner of "Progressive Islam" or "Secularism". Still their struggle for sexual equality has a long way to go. Sukaina Buaoui, one of their prominent journalists says, in a book published in 1988, that the Tunisian women of today have to face two problems that hinder their progress: first, is the conflict between granting equality and the necessity to compromise with traditions; second, the struggle against socio-cultural prejudices resulting from the menial tasks to which women are relegated and which serve to weaken their position.

## Conclusion

The women of the Maghreb -- Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco-- share with their other Arab sisters the problems which hinder complete liberation. Hence, they share underdeveloped or rudimentary politics; entrenched stereotypes; and fundamentalist movements trying to assert themselves by reviving religious fanaticism.

In 1982, The Moroccan lawyer, Amina Massaoudi Hawary, prepared a study for the UN, which was summarized in *Al-Raida* No. 31, 1985. In this study, she shows: first, the intrinsic relation between women's needs and those of the country to which they belong, "underdevelopment in Morocco is inherent to women's backwardness."; and second, that the inferior condition of women is more a result of entrenched traditions than of the Moroccan Constitution or Muslim Laws, both being misunderstood or implemented in favor of traditional behavior. The author mentions that in Tunisia, Iraq, Syria and Turkey,

polygamy has been abolished and demands the same measure for Morocco. She calls for reforms in the Personal Status Code such as those regarding inheritance, divorce and mixed marriages.

Since 1982, little change has occurred in the status of the women of the Maghreb. But the struggle continues, everywhere, sustained by the faith and courage which characterize the members of the second sex •

(1) CEAD: Centre d'Etudes Arabes pour le Development

(2) Also see "The Price of Independence: The Case of Algerian Women", *Al-Raida*, Vol. IX, No. 50, August, 1990. pg. 6-7.

(3) Lybia and Mauritania  
(4) for more information see Personal Status Code in Morocco", *Al-Raida* Vol. IX, No. 50, August, 1990. pg. 10.

(5) Evelyne Accad, "Women in contemporary Tunisia", *Al-Raida*. No. 33, August 1, 1985.

(6) Ibid.

## Miss Rose Ghurayyib,

her name has become a landmark in children's books and the women's literature.



Born in the village of Damour, in 1909, she received her high school diploma from Sidon High school and then enrolled at Beirut University College when it was still known as Junior College. In 1934 she received a Bachelor's degree in Arabic Literature and History and in 1945 a Master's degree in Arabic criticism from the American University of Beirut. She taught Arabic in a number of schools in the country including Beirut University College between 1955 and 1973.

Among the achievements of Miss Rose Ghurayyib are: 3 books of songs and musical plays; 35 books of

poems; stories and plays for children; 4 story books for young people; 2 books on modern literature and criticism; 1 book on Gibran; 2 Arabic reading books for beginners with a teacher's guidebook; 1 study on May Ziadeh published by IWSAW; over 150 newspaper, magazine and journalistic articles; 1 research on contemporary Female poets, and a book entitled *Overview on the Contemporary Women's Movement* also published by IWSAW.

Between 1974 and 1984, Miss rose ghurayyib joined the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at Beirut University College as the editor of *Al-Raida*, in addition to conducting and writing research, books and articles related to the women's issue and continues to contribute to *Al-Raida*.