

The Role of Young Women in Berber Society

■ Rabha EL Asri

The unique position of girls and young women in society has become a topic of widespread interest. Indeed, although much has been written and many conferences held on the correlation of gender and age, very few studies have truly dealt with the unique injustices and hardships undergone by young female populations in different parts of the world. The majority of the gender- and age-related work done to date seems to be a response to an academic fashion, an attempt to be en vogue, resulting largely in generalities and clichés, a repetition of stereotypes taken from the mass media, without probing deeply into the respective context and unveiling the hidden social realities upon which the suffering of young women and the injustices inflicted on them are based. Only by dealing with these social realities can the position of all women, but especially Berber girls and young women living the mountainous regions, be significantly improved.

My concern in this paper is to “give the floor” to the Berber women themselves, to enable them to express their ideas concerning their social position, how they lived in the not too remote past, during which circumstances seemed too awful for them to cope with and what has changed in recent years. I have tried to report,

as objectively as I could, on what I have personally witnessed or have learned through in-depth interviews with various elderly women, whom I asked to tell me about the memories of their individual lives. These women also revealed to me the tales told to them as girls, stories from the remote past, recounted to them by their mothers and grandmothers. I have questioned them about changes taking place in the present. For practical reasons, I have limited my research to the Middle Atlas region, and more particularly, to the Bni Mguild (Ayt Myill) women. But what I found out about their lives can be generalized to they extent that it allows the drawing of conclusions about the life of the entire Berber community.

The Life of Young Berber Women in the Past: Infancy and Early Childhood

In the past, the difficulties of Ayt Myill women’s lives began soon after birth. The entire family mourned the birth of a baby girl. An elderly woman told me that fathers, when being told that their new born child was a girl, visualized her as another man’s future property, that, in the meantime, he had to nourish, nurture and raise her, only to hand her over later on. Thus, fathers tended to spend as little as possible on their daughters.

Non-Arab Ethnic Groups

The members of the fathers extended family, but especially the paternal grandmother, would often consider the baby girl as a burden befalling her son's family, an extra and useless mouth to feed, a worthless object that also potentially threatened the honor of the entire family.

As of early childhood, Berber girls were reminded of their supposedly base nature. They were expected to atone for the disgrace that they had caused their family by being totally obedient and submissive, by serving the male members of the family, who were also considered to be superiors. Mothers knew that it was their duty to bare a baby boy, and were therefore eager to keep trying, even if they had to have ten pregnancies and more. Mothers who had gone without sons would transfer their bitterness to a new daughter, and indirectly blame her for the fact that her first child had not been a boy. As soon as possible, the mother would begin training her newborn daughter to help around the house so that she could quickly learn her duties and be prepared to face her ultimate destiny. A successful childhood was judged by the speed by which a young girl was able to carry out the everyday chores of a whole household on her own. If her daughter was slow at learning, a mother knew all too well that her in-laws and the entire extended family would blame her for it exclusively.

Until recently, girls were denied their human right to childhood, the development of their potential through play. They were frequently rebuked for manifesting childlike behavior, even at a very early age. Young girls were constantly reminded that they had no right to seek satisfaction of her own, that their role was to serve others, that their mothers were only looking out for their daughters' own good by preparing them to manage an entire household successfully. In so doing, both the mother and daughter could avoid the insults and rebuke commonly heaped on women who were not willing to be thankful for their allotted role, to obey without asking the reason why.

Preparing Girls for Marriage

At approximately the age of nine or ten, suitors became attracted to the daughters of those mothers well known for their hard work and patience. In order to test the patience and perseverance of his potential wife, a man would have his mother put the young girl through her

paces. Elderly women were seen as being much better able to find a young girl's weak spots. One means of testing her was to place an elbow on the girl's bosom and then push as hard as she could. If the pain caused the girl to flinch she was not deemed a proper match. Failure in this way was certain to play out very negatively because the potential, rebuked mother-in-law would spare no effort to expose the girl's fragility and inability to further the interests of the tribe. No young man is his

right mind, especially if he came from a respectable or influential family, would consider wedding such a "weak and lax creature." However, if a young girl did pass the test, worse laid in store for her after the marriage ceremony.

If the families of the two wedding candidates did reach agreement, young women were conventionally left in the dark as to which household they were to be transferred, into. Thus, in most cases, brides were sent to serve in a new household, among strangers, and with no preparation. Involving

their daughters in this process, or even informing them of the family's decision was considered a source of shame for their fathers or other heads of the family, e.g. the grandfather or uncle. By considering his daughters' feelings, a man proved himself to be emotional and weak, revealing womanly characteristics against which every respectable man was to guard himself. If it were to become public that a father had these attributes, he would lose the respect of his peers and the entire community.

In the past, the concept that marriage should be based on love was foreign to the Berbers of the Middle Atlas region. This lack of mutual affection was another source of suffering for many women. The presence of love in a woman's relationship to a man was attributed largely to coincidence. Families judged a new marriage as successful if the recent addition to the family was a very young woman, willing to fulfill her newly acquired responsibilities without hesitation, if, as the saying goes, she had an "obedient head" and was willing to follow the commands of her husband, but more importantly, her mother-in-law. Thus, women passed this form of oppression on from generation to generation. A mother who had delivered a son had honored her family and earned the right to be relieved of her family chores as soon as her son married. The new daughter-in-law was expected to follow in her footsteps, to relieve her of the disheartening household tasks that had robbed her of

Women are still seen as being lower, debased creatures; they are still viewed with suspicion and considered a potential family liability

her youth, and made her an old woman at a much too early age. The "old women" of a community, often only in their late twenties, had earned the right to command their daughters-in-law around the house, to force them to work outdoors in extremely hot and cold weather conditions, so that they could now enjoy their remaining years paying visits to neighbors or entertaining guests. A wife could only acquire the honor of this belated state of relative freedom if she had produced a male progenitor. Thus liberated from household responsibilities, elderly women often dared to contradict their husbands and express their own opinions, a luxury closely linked to the newfound prestige of mother-in-law status.

After marriage, a young bride's position deteriorated continuously. After the initial seven days of privacy, traditionally, but not automatically, allotted a newly wed couple, husband and wife spent their nights together in the same room as the rest of the extended family. Thus, after marrying a stranger, a woman's husband normally remained a stranger to her for many years. In those cases in which a young husband did express the desire to become more open and intimate with his wife, he was normally afraid to act on it, fearing the scorn of his relatives. Frustrated in this manner, many men compensated by being excessively rude and demanding when commanding their wives about. By publicly demonstrating toughness and harshness, he could prove that he had his wife "under control", as was befitting a member of the "lower order." Intimacies could only be exchanged quietly, in the dead of night when everybody else was sure to be sleeping. Couples were, however, unable to speak openly with each other in such moments for fear of awakening other members of the family and thereby exposing their "shame." Life as a girl and young woman in these communities meant being not only robbed of the right to relax, to play and choose, but also to be denied the opportunity to openly feel and live out one's emotions as a young wife.

The responsibilities of a new, female in-law centered on serving the senior members of her family, to whom she was not permitted to express her real feelings. Resistance was generally broken by a sound beating in an attempt to "reform" her. Daily chores included gathering wood, breaking the ice to fetch water and preparing a fire for heat and cooking purposes. Because

women had to collect and prepare firewood with their bare hands, resulting in a constantly bleeding and blue-swollen condition, they attempted to prepare an ample supply of wood for the winter before cold weather set in. If a woman was prevented from doing this because of childbirth, illness or other reasons, it was expected of her that she dig through the snow in the dead of winter in order to fulfill her wifely responsibilities.

However, even if she was able to live up to her in-laws' general expectations, she was still keep on her guard by habitual snide comments and criticism from them, or from her husband, who could demonstrate his manliness to his family by mistreating his wife. As is well known, past generations of women suffered from a lack of birth control, leading to a large number of pregnancies, which were only considered successful if a woman bore a son. The effects of years of hard work, maltreatment and multiple childbirths caused a young wife to become old before her years. She could only look forward to escaping this situation by producing a healthy son, who would bring a new daughter-in-law into the family, liberating her and repeating the cycle in the next generation.

The Present-Day Position of Young Berber Woman

Life has changed for everyone during the last few decades, so it should come as no surprise that the girls and young Berber women of the Middle Atlas Mountains have also begun to benefit from this transition.

Unfortunately, the harshness of mountain life has improved only slightly, and the difficulty of human existence in this region weighs especially hard on the living conditions of the young, female population. Many have pointed to the recent introduction of a modern school system in these mountains as proof that the current, youngest Berber generation is finally being introduced to the norms of the modern world. Signs of this ongoing process of integration in the midst of the Atlas Mountains include the processions of children, proudly carrying

their school bags on their backs, on their way to and from school, and the significant number of little girls amongst them. But will this recently introduced access to primary education in any way free the next generation of young Atlas Berber women from the hardships experienced by the grandmothers, mothers and, in many cases, their older sisters as well? If the social and economic environment in which they still live remains

... women suffered from a lack of birth control, leading to a large number of pregnancies, which were only considered successful if a woman bore a son.

Non-Arab Ethnic Groups

largely the same for the foreseeable future, which forces of change can improve their lives? In one of my recent visits to our tribe in the Middle Atlas Mountains, I observed that far reaching changes could neither be observed on the cultural nor on the socio-economic levels.

Women are still seen as being lower, debased creatures; they are still viewed with suspicion and considered a potential family liability in all aspects of their private and public lives. Studies that I am currently carrying out have revealed that these young women continue to be understood as creatures guided by instinct, not by reason, and that they are portrayed as being too weak to be more than "mere dolls in male hands." On the positive side, newborn baby girls are no longer considered to be exclusively a burden to the family. They are now usually welcomed and cherished, although a slight distinction is still made between baby boys and girls during the traditional birth celebrations. In a significant shift in roles, some families now even consider the affectionate and caring attributes expected of their daughters to be an asset, guaranteeing that the parents will be taken better care of in their old age.

The erosion of the position of the traditional extended family in Berber society is also taking its toll on the roles expected of young women. Many young men now chose to withdrawal from the control of their father and mother. They set up a household outside the confines of the extended family. This has broken the passing on of responsibility from the mother to the daughter-in-law, the later of which is generally blamed for undermining the traditional blood relations between parent and child. These claims are based on the fact that she is of "separate blood." Having fled from the expectations to free her new mother-in-law of her traditional household duties, young brides are accused of conspiring with their young husbands and encouraging them to escape the authority of their parents. Although the hardships of running a newly founded household under extreme mountainous conditions can be quite daunting, the traditional household chores have been diminished because the young bride is now living alone with her husband. Gathering firewood and fetching water have become no easier, but now she is doing these things for her own nuclear family. This new generation of independent brides tends to actually embrace their age-old responsi-

bilities, one reason for this being that they can thereby prove their value to their husbands and reassure them that they have invested their money wisely. Young women thereby also demonstrate to their in-laws that the departure of the newly wedded couple has deprived the extended family of a treasure that it does not deserve.

In order to shore up their newly gained position of responsibility, the young wives will often be overly critical of other newlyweds, chastising women who have, for whatever reason, been less successful in transitioning to nuclear family status. Successful young housewives are known to gossip and spread rumors about other women in the neighborhood, accusing them of being careless about their households, totally ignoring the circumstances that these new families might find themselves in. Thus, these women take on the male role in society. Emboldened by their newly found household success, they consider any other woman who does not perform her marital duties to perfection to be an inferior wife and thus an incomplete human being.

Changes are also taking place with respect to the freedom that young girls and young women enjoy when choosing a future partner. It is now no longer considered out of the ordinary for them to visit the weekly market with their parents. There they can survey the available young men, engage with them in conversation and thus make a preselection about whom they wish to

marry. This new freedom can also encourage a young woman to take the precarious step of using public celebrations and social events to secretly meet the young man of her choice, knowing full well that she risks serious punishment if caught. The sanctions for such illicit liaisons are normally accompanied by a sullyng of a woman's reputation, thus stamping her as unsuitable for marriage and the role of running a proper and respectable household. If a girl or young woman is accused of violating the socially accepted rules and values, her reputation

will be ruined for life. Although the heads of the Berber tribes set up laws that most male members are no longer willing to live by, female non-compliance is still viewed as a crime that accompanies a woman to her grave. As a form of retribution, women are often forced by their families to marry another man against their will, a lifelong punishment for youthful delinquency. Young women thus are now living in a situation of cultural

Women are still seen as being lower, debased creatures; they are still viewed with suspicion and considered a potential family liability ...

schizophrenia; while embracing their decision to choose their own partner, whom they wish to love and live with in peace for the rest of their life, they still live in a social environment that does not recognize this right.

Anecdotal evidence of the identity crisis now confronting Berber girls and young women can be found in my own extended family. I can give a concrete example of a cousin of mine, which just occurred two years ago. She was discovered to be in an amorous relationship with a young man from the same tribe. The young man was a constant visitor to the family home, and feelings of love grew between them. The discovery that my cousin had acted on her own in this manner greatly angered her father; he tried, and he is still trying to prevent any legal bonds that might unite the two and thus legitimize their relationship. His desperate attempts to separate my cousin from her freely chosen partner has even led him to attempt to send his disobedient daughter to Saudi Arabia although she is only 17 years old. Ironically, my uncle is actually aware that what he is doing violates both the rules of logic and respect for legitimate human feelings. However, his male ego has led him to believe that he has been violated as a father; this prevents him from acquiescing and is blinding his sense of reason. This family crisis will most certainly put an end to any similar expectations on the part of his other four daughters.

It is important to mention here that a woman's choice of a future partner is not longer rejected out of hand. However, the decision of a young couple will not be tolerated without the blessing of the parents. They are the ones who have the final word; either it is consent or a refusal of the match. In order to prevent the family crisis described above, the parents of the potential bridegroom often select trusted individuals from their tribe to approach the future bride's father and beg that he agree to give his daughter in marriage. If this strategy fails, frustrated couples in our tribe have been known to elope. Defying both social norms and their parents in this way, these newly wedded couples are frequently confronted with a major scandal in the community, which often undermines their relationship and replaces romantic intentions with the most unpleasant of feelings. The stereotypical romanticism of the Berber tribes is indeed relegated to folklore, tribal celebrations and tales from the distant past that have no bearing on the reality experienced by young

women today. Parental opposition to a marriage that does not enjoy their support is constant and overbearing. The continuous intervention of the family against the young couple frequently breaks down their romantic expectations, leading, sooner or later, to divorce. In the end, deadly indifference surrounds the separated couple.

When a relationship ends in divorce, it can have very detrimental consequences for a young woman. She will normally find it almost impossible to return to her family and continue living there the way she did prior to her marriage. Her father, who assumed that he was no longer responsible for her well being, is now her only source of income, thus adding a new and unexpected financial burden to his family. Faced with this highly unpleasant alternative, many recently divorced women are drawn to the attractions of life in town. Of late, girls and young women often do have the opportunity to visit urban centers now and again. Town life promises to provide comfort, cleanliness, and more modern social values. In recent years, rural women, especially young divorcees, have moved to Sidi Addi, Azrou and Ain Leuh. Here, they often form collective groups in order to cover the rent and living expenses and cope with the new demands of a life alone in an urban setting.

Tragically, many young divorced women have young children to provide for, this compelling them to find income at any cost. Appropriate work at a decent wage can rarely be found in these towns because their economies are largely based on agriculture and controlled by men. Consequently, it is not uncommon that young rural women are forced into prostitution in order to provide for themselves and their children. Beginning as a casual pursuit, the demands of day-to-day life turn prostitution into a profession.

When a relationship ends in divorce, it can have very detrimental consequences for a young woman.

In conclusion, this portrayal of the transition in the lives of Berber girls and young women in the Middle Atlas Mountains has illustrated that the key to improving their situation lies in an overall improvement in the socio-economic conditions of the general mountain population. In order for them to maintain the hope that their lives will someday

be better, emphasis should be placed on the financial resources necessary for development. On its own, broadening the horizons of young girls through the introduction of primary and secondary education in the mountainous regions will only serve to deepen the social and cultural contradictions that young women are faced with today.