

Women, an Agent for Modernity in Arab-Muslim Societies

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When we talk about Arab countries, we normally group other countries with them that are not Arab, such as Turkey, Iran or Pakistan, or which are only Arab to a minor degree, such as the Maghreb countries, which are more Berber than Arab. The reason for this is because they share in common the significant cultural weight of Islam and its legal sequelae. It is also true that the patriarchy in the Mediterranean casts a long shadow and that legal equality by itself is not enough, as change processes are much slower in traditional sectors.

However, according to the United Nations Development Programme's latest report on human development (UNDP, 2003), although democratic reforms have been relatively modest in Arab countries, where there persists a generalised tendency for a high level of gender inequality, one surprising fact emerges: all the countries for which data are available are in the process of achieving the goal of 100% enrolment in primary education and an improvement in secondary education. Tunisia is already there and in Morocco, 74% of the girls are enrolled in primary education. It is true that there are differences between urban and rural areas, and that 50% of girls aged 14 and over are unable to continue their education. However, the school knowledge acquired enables them to read magazines and understand radio and television

documentaries which talk about their identity as women. The same can be said of the boys, which enables them to move away from the family environment in search of work. The result is a larger number of nuclear, less endogamous families, weakening the influence of tradition. Furthermore, there is a clear relationship between the number of years of schooling received by girls and the fall in the birth rate –of course, economic and employment factors also have an influence– but the data are particularly striking in the Maghreb countries, where girls are getting married at considerably later ages and the fertility rates in 2003 are 2.87 in Morocco, 2 in Tunisia and 2.8 in Algeria where, 30 years ago, it was 7.4.

According to the sociologist Fatema Mernissi, if we define «digital Islam» as all the information products that reach consumers in Muslim countries by satellite, we can say that Arab women are moving with considerable ease in this new galaxy. This is one of the most surprising developments that has taken place since the September 11 attacks. The Moroccan writer says that al-Jazeera is increasing its audience nightly thanks to the eloquence of its new anchor women, Jumana Nammour and Kadija Bin Guna, and its female economics expert Farah al Baraqaui; as regards employment capacity in this sector, Mernissi says that «Only in Egypt of the 80,000 people who work in the radio and the television, 50,000 are women and have developed strategies successfully to be able (istiad) to also occupy important positions in the directive hierarchies and as leaders of the radio stations and television».

One could argue to the writer that these women are a minority and that the ma-

jority are still subjugated, particularly in the private legal sphere, which is true.

Although south Mediterranean politicians are still allergic to the presence of women in their Parliaments, women have organised their silent revenge and are invading en masse the scientific world and the engineering professions. The current percentages are 33.6% in Iran, 30.3% in Turkey, 27.6% in Algeria and 31.3% in Morocco. In Algeria, 43% of primary and secondary school teachers and 25% of university teachers are women; in the same country, 25% of the magistrates are women. The presence is even higher in health, where 66% of the pharmacists, 63% of the dentists and 50% of the physicians are women. So, in spite of the low general level of female employment in these countries, women have a very strong presence in skilled and highly skilled jobs. However, it is also true that the low official figures of female employment are not accurate, as many women work in the underground economy.

The Algerian sociologist Souad Khodja wonders whether Arab women's claims for civil rights and the tenacity of tradition will be permanently in conflict or whether this is only a short-term dilemma. The indicators show that today, for example, most Algerian women have entered the modern age because they have the tools considered necessary to enable them to exercise their rights as citizens and that, in this sense, the integrists have come on the scene too late, hence the virulence of the confrontation.

The situation of women in Arab countries is marked by the duality between tradition and modernity. On one hand, there is a modernist elite that is demanding full citizenship for women with

the institutionalisation of rights through fair, equitable laws, and, on the other hand, a conservative sector that is opposing these rights.

Although patriarchy has tried to dominate women in the Mediterranean, it has not been an easy task and, in spite of a certain appearance of success, still reflected in the family codes of most Arab-Muslim countries, it is now starting to collapse. Civil society, particularly the enormous growth of women's associations who are fighting for reform and the increasingly obvious participation of women in the public sphere, highlights the contradiction with these countries' apparently democratic constitutions, where, in principle, both men and women are treated as citizens. The emergent associationism fights for the inclusion of women in public and economic life, and supports their integration in the job market. In fact, there are many local development associations that are working to increase the visibility and social value of women.

An important development in this sense is the announcement made last October by King Mohamed VI at the Moroccan Parliament concerning the reform of the *mudawana*. As part of the changes that it is planned to make in the family code, women can marry without needing the permission of their family, they can object to marriages arranged by their family and they can exercise their right to divorce. Polygamy is not prohibited, but a woman can demand that her future husband commit himself in writing to monogamy. Neither is repudiation prohibited but, with the possibility of the two spouses divorcing, its importance is decreased considerably. This reform, which could come into force next January, has yet to be discussed in Parliament.

A few days after the Moroccan king's decision to modernise the family code, the Algerian government also created a commission to review the country's family code. It should be remembered that the present code is taken from the

sharia (Islamic law) and was adopted in 1984, under the single-party regime of the National Liberation Front. Consequently, its review is rejected by most women's defence associations, who demand derogation of the code and sexual equality before the law.

For reforms to be possible, the strategy of the political parties and feminist movements, as is happening in other Mediterranean countries that do not apply the *sharia* to women's personal status like Tunisia and Turkey, should concentrate on changing people's mentality. However, one significant factor is that when we are talking about Arab women, we are talking about a majority of young women. This is very important for the future, as women under 24 account for 60% of the female population, versus 30% in Europe.

Without doubt, many analysts on both shores of the Mediterranean are convinced that human rights for Arab women will be the major project of the 21st century.

ARAB HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2003

The first Arab human development report (2002) became a reference publication, with more than a million downloads of the report from the Internet. The first report focused on highlighting the main challenges facing development of the Arab world. The second report (2003) continues this process, analysing one of these challenges in depth: the construction of a knowledge society in Arab countries.

The report reviews the basic ingredients that favour development of the knowledge society and, in its conclusions, presents a strategic vision based on five key concepts as guidelines for achieving a knowledge society.

- Guaranteeing a climate of freedom is vital for a knowledge society. Freedom of opinion,

freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, promoting creativity and innovation, and strengthening scientific research, technological development and artistic expression.

- Provide quality education. Assuring a universal basic education is an initial goal that must be expanded improving quality at all levels and developing an adult education system.

- Build, strengthen and increase research and development capacity within social activities, through the promotion of basic research and the creation of regional innovation networks that provide an interface between regional and international spheres.

- Gear socio-economic structures towards knowledge-based production, which implies

diversifying economic and market structures via technological capacity, and increasing Arab presence in the new economy and consolidating incentives that support human development.

- Develop an Arab knowledge model based on: a reform of the vision and role of religion in society; promote and develop Arabic as a language of scientific knowledge; incorporate the Arab cultural heritage in knowledge development; promote and advocate the Arab countries' cultural diversity and their receptiveness to other cultures, through exchanges, promotion of translations and maximizing the benefits provided by international and regional organizations.

<http://www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr>