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Tunisia

**"The fight against the
exploitation of women can be
an engine for overall social
change."**

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Ahlem Belhadj, President of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), spoke to Eve Fitoussi and Alain Baron for *Afriques21* in January 2012 about the current situation of women in Tunisia.

What kind of discrimination is suffered by women? What is their situation currently?

In relation to the rest of the Arab world, the status of Tunisian women is rather specific. They benefited quite early on from progressive laws. In 1956, for example, the personal status code prohibited polygamy and granted the right to divorce. In 1964, women were granted the right to abortion, i.e. well before the French. They had the right to vote in 1957, 15 years before Swiss women. Tunisian Governments often exploited the cause of women as being the showcase of democracy and modernity, by instituting a sort of "state feminism".

However, strong inequality, never raised by these same leaders, persisted in Tunisian law, especially at the level of the family. In a completely patriarchal conception, the husband, the "head of family", is the only holder of parental authority. Women are considered as heads of family in exceptional cases. Moreover, estate law remains a very important area where women are victims of clear discrimination since the law requires women to meet the needs of the ascendants and descendants by inheriting half as much as men. This is for us unacceptable. Despite clear legal texts, judgements that are made are often marked by a certain machismo.

On the social front, particularly among employees, there is a phenomenon of feminization of poverty. As everywhere in the world, the unemployment rate is much higher for women: also, women are less likely to find a job. The problem of graduate unemployment is flagrant among women. Despite the equality displayed by the Labour Code, women are paid less and are less likely to progress to the professional level. The work of women is also much more frequently marginalized. Precarious employment primarily affects women, particularly housewives or those operating in the sector of subcontracting. These are areas where exploitation is at its worst.

These are the main manifestations of discrimination against women but, obviously, there are others, including as regards the participation of women in political life. Women remain very rarely present at the level of the positions of power. Not only at the level of high ranks in the ministries but also at the level of civil society.

The same is true at the trade union level: as usual, no woman was elected to the National Directorate at the congress of the UGTT, the largest Tunisian union, in December 2011, although more than 40% of union members are women. The rate of presence of women at the level of the intermediary structures of the UGTT is also very low. It is an environment where there are many things to do in the area of gender equality.

What was the role of women in the revolution?

Tunisian women were very present at all stages of the revolution, and not only during the period from December 17 to January 14. They participated in the preparation of this revolution, especially in trade union struggles where they were massively mobilized because they are very much present in fragile areas. For example, at the beginning of the 2000s, and following the "Multifibre Agreement" affecting the textile sector, which is particularly feminized, it was women who started the social struggles, the strikes, the sit-ins.

This wave of demonstrations by women, which showed a great fighting spirit, was also the source of the Tunisian

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Social Forum. Women were also involved in the democratic struggles for human rights by spreading a sentiment and a culture of opposition to the Ben Ali regime. They spoke of repression and corruption and they fought for democracy, for freedom, for the rights of women.

The movement of the mining basin in 2008, a very important stage which preceded the Tunisian revolution, was triggered by women. The mothers of youth who were not recruited for work started the sit-in in the streets of the region of Gafsa and ensured resistance on a daily basis.

In December 2010 and January 2011 - the media reported on it a lot - women were present everywhere in the street, on blogs, in the confrontations, in all manifestations of revolution. And they were able to experience an equal citizenship alongside men at these events.

After the fall of Ben Ali, what were the changes? How do you see the future?

Unfortunately, after the revolution, things have become a little harder. Yet, there was the impression that the strong participation of women in the revolution was preparing the ground for more equality, more rights for Tunisian women. Women who actively participated in the revolution of course wanted to obtain immediately egalitarian laws.

And this claim has been related to that of the separation of politics and religion that appeared as the corollary of equality. We cannot obtain equality by continuing to refer to Sharia law.

Then, there is a battle for the greater participation of women in political life. Finally a historic law was passed by a large number of representatives of the "Higher Body for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution". This work has helped the more disadvantaged women to be present on lists, participate in some meetings, and even to go home late! I think that this will have an effect on attitudes, but perhaps in the long term. In the shorter term, there a little more than 25% of women among elected representatives in the constituent assembly, even if the majority belong to Ennahda.

However, as for equality at the legal and social level, for all women in all regions, things are less obvious. Now, in the political world, there is talk of preserving the achievements of women but no one speaks any more of an improvement of the laws. It is for example requested that our association focus only on preserving the achievements, while we have fought for 20 years for real equality, especially in the family.

This increasingly common discourse is largely imposed by the presence of Ennahda in the Government. Faced with Ennahda, it is necessary to at least preserve the gains so as not to leave open breaches that could let it impose serious setbacks in some areas. It is true that a number of religious fundamentalists, especially Salafis, but also some members of Ennahda, speak of fundamental issues such as polygamy, adoption, or even hilafa (Islamic governance) that threaten the rights of women.

In relation to the right to work and the feminization of poverty that I have just described, nothing favours women. They are the poorest, those who have less property, who are the most exploited. Instead, voices rise to claim that women take the work of young people, or call on women to stay home and attack working women.

There are still threats against the situation of women. But, there is a great mobilization of women, who are extremely vigilant and organised to constitute a genuine bulwark against any form of regression. I think also that the fight against the exploitation of women and male domination can be an engine for overall social change.

It is by making the link between the different levels of control - the fight against inequalities between the sexes,

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economic and social inequalities, regional inequalities, and so on - that things will have any chance of success in Tunisia. And we remain optimistic on all these challenges because the mobilization is there, and people are very attentive to what is currently done.