

## Women at the Tahar Haddad Club

**The Tahar Haddad Club** is one of the many cultural clubs that exist in Tunisia. Situated right in the middle of the old city of Tunis—the Medina — it carries the name of a famous Tunisian reformist of the early 20th century, who advocated the emancipation and equality of women.

Established by a group of Tunisian intellectuals ten years ago and directed by the remarkable journalist and writer, **Jelila Hafsia**, it comprises a dozen clubs, each with a specific area of interest (law, music, poetry, literature... etc).

Among the most active is the **Women's Club** which was founded in 1978. The first issue of its bulletin, **Par Nous Mêmes** (By Ourselves), states: «Our situation as women as well as our reflection on women's condition in Tunisia have made us create, within the context of the Club Tahar Haddad, a study group where women could regain control of themselves, reflect, express themselves freely and come out with answers. This is why it was decided to have a club strictly for women».

The most important aims of the **Women's Club** are:

- To pinpoint the specific problems facing Tunisian women.
- To articulate them through research, interviews and discussions.
- To organize cultural events that would sensitize the maximum number of people (males and females) to women's problems.

Since its inception, the club has organized many events such as debates with visiting feminists, Nawal El Saadawi of Egypt and Fatma Mernissi of Morocco. Some of the debates were open to men such as the ones on «Freedom of the Press», the «Rights of Women», «The Image of Women in the Media», «Women and Violence», «Women and Sexuality» and a conference on «Women and Mental Illness».

The Women's Club has encouraged women's artistic expression in theatre, poetry, short story writing, painting and film screening.

What is unique about this club, however, according



**Jelila Hafsia**  
Director of the Tahar Haddad Club

to members Zeineb Guchiss, Rachida Enneifer and Hayet Gribaa, is the method that has been used to analyze women's conditions. The key question asked was: to what extent do women perpetuate their own alienation?

It is after asking this question that the women of the club saw it necessary to tackle their problems as active «subjects» and not as «passive victims»; and also to view research on women in a different perspective. ►

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That means to look at women's work, for instance, not as a «case study» but as a «lived experience», an action that changes women's lives. Also, to analyze women's conditions through «collective reflection», to bring down the barriers separating the «cultural» from the «political» and the «personal» from the «public», and to encourage women to talk about themselves not as «objects of debate» but as «autonomous subjects».

Women, say club members, should reevaluate their own image and their own words by examining the various discourses held on women and by observing the way women are portrayed in different sectors of the media.

Women, they add, should «learn to speak, to listen to each other and encourage one another to speak up in any language they want (Arabic or French)».

Commenting on the women's club, three women who did not wish to be named said:

- I think this club is like a big family; I can be away and come back whenever I want. There is always a spirit of communion that prevails.
- The women's club discusses the dominant ideas in

our society. This means it is not self-centered. It has been a subject of debate in wider circles because of the special way it raises women's questions. It is a place for exchange... When I first arrived to the club in 1979 and I was identified by outsiders as a member, I understood that each of us expressed herself differently, but that all had common goals. What I consider positive in this club is the will for establishing a dialogue and to be open to one another... to minimize the reflection on the cultural is wrong because culture is the starting point of all change.

How do the women of the club reach decisions? Not through voting, they answer, but through consensus. This implies a more active participation of each member in decisions taken.

In conclusion, the club's effort to push for «rehabilitating the cultural» has not been fruitless, despite some women's criticism of the «limitation of cultural activities».

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☆ See article by **Lilia Chabbi**, P.