

Women in South Yemen⁽¹⁾

Recent studies on Arab women have shown the existence of two factors in bringing about a change in their status. One is evolutionary and attributed to the spread of Western culture. The other is revolutionary and imposed by leaders with leftist or anti-capitalist tendencies. According to Maxine Molyneux, author of the article here condensed, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) is the only Arab country attempting to implement a policy of revolutionary socialist development, in contrast with those states in the Muslim world which have attempted to improve the position of women while retaining a capitalist economy.

Since 1967, the Republic has been governed by the National Liberation Front (NLF) which in 1968 declared itself committed to the goals of Marxism and Leninism and to the complete support of the principle of sexual equality.

During the guerrilla struggle against the British Army, women played an active role. In the post-independence period, the General Union of Yemeni Women (GUYW) was organized as a political arm to the Party. The Yemeni Constitution included its commitment to the mobilization of women to participate in development and the raising of their political consciousness.

The Family Law of 1974⁽²⁾ directly confronted traditional and religious practices, removed the worst inequalities which they contained without openly attacking religion itself. Maxine Molyneux summarizes the most important changes introduced as follows: 1) Prohibition of polygamy except under certain circumstances such as the disablement or barrenness of the first wife; 2) Abolition of divorce by repudiation and of men's exclusive rights over property and children; 3) Limitation of the bride-price; 4) Prohibition of compulsory marriage and of the marriage of minors.

The restriction of divorce is intended to reinforce family structure and to protect children in a thinly-populated country. A campaign waged against women's illiteracy succeeded in increasing female participation at all levels of education. However, the number of girls in the total school population does not exceed 31%, the most marked differential appearing in the rural areas.

Serious efforts have been made to encourage women's participation in wage labor, considered a necessary step for executing the development program. Women are now largely represented in industry and agriculture but restricted to lower paid jobs: clerical labor, factory work, teaching and nursing. As in other countries, working women have to face the problems of child care and of the double burden of work in and outside the home.

Considering the short lapse of time between colonization and independence, we may assert that the women of PDYR have achieved a marked improvement in their overall situation, but obstacles to their full emancipation there, as in other socialist countries, derive from two factors: 1) prioritization of economic development and subordination of all other areas of social policies to this goal; 2) reliance on reforms from above, i.e. from the ruling party, to bring about the desired changes.

Interviews made with a few women engaged in feminist activities serve to clarify the advantages and disadvantages of women's situation in their country. In answer to a question regarding the abolition of the veil, one of them said that political struggle should come before a campaign against the veil. Both the veil and the sheidor, she said, will start to disappear by themselves as a result of social development.

When asked about female circumcision, a practice widely spread in Yemen, the interviewee said: «it is degrading», yet no one thinks of issuing a law against it. A similar problem, prostitution, should be fought, according to these women, through a struggle against poverty and economic dependence. «The oppression of women cannot end unless oppression in the whole society is eliminated.»»

(1) Condensed from «Women in South Yemen» by Maxine D. Molyneux, *Peuples Méditerranéens*, (Mediterranean Peoples), no. 12, Paris, Juillet-Septembre 1980, pp. 33-49.

(2) See Al-Raida, Nov. 1980, Vol. III, no. 14, p. 11.