

Iran after 1979: Immediately upon taking power, Ayatollah Khomeini began a campaign to “drive women back into the sphere of domesticity.” Their mere presence in public was described as ‘seditious’ and “they were required to don the Islamic *hijab*, covering them from top to toe.” Defiance of the rule to wear the *hijab* was punishable by 74 lashes (p232).

Pakistan.: In 1980 Zia Ul-Huq issued the first of a series of directives ordering all women government employees to veil (p233).

Egypt: 67% of the veiled university students responding to the questionnaire agreed to the proposal that *Sharia* law should become the law of the land, and 53% of the unveiled women agreed. It is surely extremely doubtful that either group has any idea of the extremes of control, exclusion, injustice, and brutality that can be legitimately meted out to women in the name of Islam (p234).

The reemergent veil is an emblem of many things, prominent among which is the rejection of the West. In the 19th century, under the influence of Western thinking, it became the symbol of backwardness, and Muslim women sought advancement through unveiling. Today, the symbol is still there, but it has become an expression of cultural resurgence. Muslim women are again “veiling” in order to take stronger roles in their own society.

THE GOOD TUNISIAN GIRL

Factors To Consider When Trying To Reach Young Tunisian Women With The Gospel

by Katherine Conrad

“I want to marry Leila.” Ahmed informs his mother. It is one of his most decisive steps on the pathway to being able to marry the woman of his life. *“I first want to find out if she is a good girl,”* his mother responds, rather skeptically.

During the weeks that follow, Ahmed’s mother contacts Leila’s relatives, neighbours and other acquaintances, to find out what kind of girl she is. They ultimately confirm that she comes from a respectable, well-to-do family—and that she is a “good” girl. Ahmed and Leila can now happily be united.

But what is it that makes Leila a “good” girl? By what standards is she judged? To what set of measurements is she subjected? To which role must she conform, in order to be accepted in her family and in society? And—what kind of self-image does she develop while trying to behave in this “right” way?

The Status of Women in Tunisian Society

“Good” Tunisian girls are identified mostly by what they are *not*, or *do not do*. Because women are generally considered to have less worth than men, a good Tunisian woman is one who does not take for herself rights which are reserved for men. Practically this means that she should not decide things for herself, do things on her own, or try in any way to be independent. For example, she is not granted the right to decide about her future (what

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or where to study, whom to marry, where to live or with whom, and certainly not to live alone); she is not supposed to take care of herself, in terms of paperwork and often not even finances; she is not supposed to move about outside the house as it pleases her. The list could be continued.

In a nutshell, she is expected to be helpless, submissive, and willing to let others think and decide things for her. (Although Tunisian society is drifting more and more towards western values, and although equality of the sexes is being encouraged, traditional patterns of behaviour and thinking still very much prevail, even in the more westernised and "modern" parts of society.)

How Young Tunisian Women View Themselves

As a consequence (or is it *because of this*? It is difficult to draw lines here), young Tunisian women generally have a picture of themselves which matches their assigned role: they think of themselves as being inferior to men, they feel incapable of making major decisions (apart from what to cook today), and they are afraid of anything that includes exploring something new (like finding an address they haven't been to before, or using a metro-line they haven't used before).

Some women, who have had to move away from home for the sake of work or studies, are experiencing a greater amount of freedom. These women have learned to be more independent on a few practical levels. This however does not change their basic role as women. Often another male family member who is living close by takes over the role of the girl's father and brothers.

Fear of Being Alone

One interesting trait, typical of Tunisian women, is a fear (almost a horror) of being alone. This characteristic is almost universal, whereas the traits mentioned earlier might vary from individual to individual. Girls are seldom able to go outside the house by themselves, even if they are only going round the corner to the next public telephone. Staying at home on their own, they generally become depressed or frightened after a very short time. They are afraid to sleep alone. Anything they do has to be together with others.

A major reason for this, of course, is that they are used to living with a family, or with a group of girls. Therefore, they are incredibly social, congenial, willing to share, etc. However their fear of being alone can only fully be understood if we bear in mind the lack of self-confidence they feel due to being a woman.

Relationships with Men

Probably the most important area in which a Tunisian girl is judged for being "good" or "bad" concerns her behaviour towards men. If you are a man and like to flirt, you might possibly get away with it; not so if you are a girl. The mere act of talking to a guy can, under some circumstances, ruin your reputation (this is especially true in villages). The expected standard for a girl in her relationships with men is total chastity and abstinence. The ideal would be a girl who never talks to any male being, apart from the members of

her family. One day someone will fall in love with her good reputation and ask her parents for her hand, before he has even exchanged a word with her.

Of course we know that reality is quite different, but the ideal is still there—somewhere in the Tunisian mind. Most girls try to play this role, at least in public (which, of course, makes it more complicated to initiate relationships from the woman's side). Moreover, passivity, submission and helplessness are quite dominant in defining a woman's relationship with men. Feeling generally inferior, and suffering from domination and ill-treatment (with no possibility for reprisal because of their status), girls often desire to marry out of a longing for protection. Sadly, hardly any of them is aware that the protection they are looking for (against domination from male society), merely perpetuates the pattern from which they are trying to escape.

Housework

There is one area in which girls are positively judged or measured by what they do, rather than by what they don't do. Since women's life is traditionally restricted to the home, any way of expressing creativity or individualism needs to be within the domain of housework, such as cooking, cleaning, decorating, knitting. Having done housework since their childhood, Tunisian girls are normally proficient in at least the areas of cooking and cleaning. They face quite high standards, especially regarding "cleanliness." It is, however, more or less taken for granted that a woman knows how to take care of the house. So the moral issues mentioned earlier are more important criteria for determining if she is "good."

Summary

To summarize, Tunisian girls are not allowed the freedom and respect they deserve as human beings. As a result, they suffer from low self-esteem, and fail to develop their personalities and intellects as they should. The formation of their character is deeply affected by the role they are given in society. (Of course hardly any Tunisian women are aware of this themselves.)

Some Conclusions

Where does religion come in all this?

Because girls are submissive, easily scared (including being scared of God's punishment), and conscientious, and because they have learned to accept rules and to obey without questioning, they are generally more religious than guys, at least in that which concerns the fulfillment of religious duties. Not a small number pray (although they are still a minority, and they pray mostly out of duty). Nearly all girls fast during Ramadan. (There seems to be a higher percentage of guys than girls who don't observe the fast, at least this is what I personally observed.) I conclude that the women are generally more religious than the men

Our Approach in Evangelism

How can we take all these things into account in our communication of the Gospel so as to enable them to respond? It is not sufficient to use the approach of intellectually challen-

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ging their Islamic beliefs. As important as it may be to discuss differences between Islam and Christianity, by itself this is not a successful approach to evangelism. In any event, they are not Muslims, for the most part, because they are intellectually convinced that it is true, but rather because their status and position in society demands "submission." This means that even if we could prove Islam wrong, which is in itself difficult to do when the person is not trained to think critically, this would not change their status, and would therefore not provide a reason for them to set it aside.

It is important not only to confront a person with the Gospel, but at the same time to enable him/her to respond to it. In the case of young Tunisian women, a response to the Gospel is very much linked to self-esteem and the ability to think and decide things for themselves. It is most important to concentrate on God being LOVE. Let's not try to break down their Islamic beliefs before we have erected a sound foundation of love upon which they can build their new belief in Jesus. When we communicate true LOVE that gives them VALUE as individuals, a value they are currently deprived of as women, we will meet one of their most desperate needs.

If we adapt our approach to their needs, Tunisian women could easily become the most responsive segment of society. As it stands, they are certainly one of the most needy.

WOMEN OF THE SAHARA

by Fiona Roberts

Talking to young Muslim women in my remote corner of North Africa has some things in common with talking to certain secular Western girls. Interest in spiritual things is more or less limited to fortune-telling. Conversation revolves around *fashion, money and men*. To them, my spurning the advances of a wealthy admirer is a far more serious problem than my refusing to accept Mohammad as a prophet.

Fashion

You might wonder how women can discuss fashion when all they ever wear is a floor-length piece of fabric wrapped around their bodies from head to toe. But you soon spot the world of difference between a teenage girl's transparent, pastel-tinted polyester, worn hitched up at the ankle and falling back off her hair, and her grandmother's thick indigo cloth swathed from head to toe. It's a sign of the many changes that have taken place in this people-group. They were mostly nomads until the 1970's when years of drought began to drive them from the desert to the towns. While their grandparents studied only the Qur'an and lived without the most basic amenities, young people now enjoy education, imported goods and satellite TV.

Money

Women, who traditionally own the tents in a nomadic family, also own and rent out property in town. Not many women go out to work, but nor do most men; unemployment