

***Women, Sexual Rights and Reproductive Rights: Gains, freedoms, resistances***  
**17-19 November 2006, Tunisia**

*organized by*

**Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) and Women for Women's  
Human Rights (WWHR) – New Ways**

**Summary Conference Report**

The international conference *Women, Sexual Rights and Reproductive Rights: Gains, freedoms and resistances* was held in Tunis, Tunisia between 17-19 November, 2006. The meeting, organized by the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD), Tunisia and Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR) – New Ways, Turkey, was the first ever meeting on sexual rights in Tunisia.

The meeting was organized and held under very constraining circumstances due to the immense state and police pressure and oppression in Tunisia, where no independent NGO had been allowed to organize a meeting for the past three years. ATFD was not able to confirm a venue for the meeting until only a few days before, since most hotels refused to provide a meeting space. Until the very last minute, we were expecting the police, who had the meeting venue under surveillance, to avert the meeting. Participants from Egypt and Jordan were refused visas, while a participant from Palestine was subject to Israeli police harassment at the airport and could not come. Despite all these obstacles, *Women, Sexual Rights and Reproductive Rights* was both a landmark for bringing issues of sexuality and sexual rights on the agenda publicly in Tunisia for the first time, and also a manifestation of ATFD's determined efforts to promote rights and freedoms despite the trying circumstances. There was wide interest in the conference with over 100 participants from women's and human rights groups, international agencies and NGOs and the media.

The conference started out with presentations from ATFD and WWHR-New Ways to draw the framework of the meeting including an analysis and identification of sexual rights, the global and regional contexts, the rights based approach to sexuality and the efforts to promote sexual, bodily and reproductive rights. The following presentations in the session focused on the Arab states' approach to sexual and reproductive rights, women's right to self determination through the issue of abortion. The discussions and debates on the first day were centered around the taboos around sexuality, the fact the sexuality is a public and political issue rather than a private one, questions of morality being defined over women's bodies and sexuality, the taboo on women's desire and the necessity to overcome the restraints caused by the limitation of women's sexuality and sexual rights to reproduction.

The second day of the meeting included presentations and discussion on a number of different issues highlighting the national and regional contexts, analyses of demographic transitions in the region, Islam and women's bodies, trafficking, sexual rights and law reform, sexuality and marginalized groups such as sex workers, lesbians, disabled people, sexual violence, case studies of HIV/AIDS outreach work with sex workers in Egypt, medical abortion in Tunisia, war and sexual rights through examples of Lebanon and Algeria. Emerging issues and debates included the obstacles to promote sexual rights, aggravated by the increasing militarism, nationalism and conservative ideologies; and strategies to overcome such obstacles such as the need for law reform, sharing of best practices, and challenging the constructs and taboos on sexuality. There was extensive discussion on marginalized groups, in particular sex workers and lesbians, distinction between sexual and reproductive rights, and the need to speak freely about sexuality.

Workshops on sexuality education, strategies to promote sexual rights, and advocacy and lobbying were held on the final day of the meeting. The priorities expressed in the concluding plenary session included: the need for an alternative sexuality education -both formal and informal- not limiting women's sexuality to biology and reproduction with a rights based approach; the need to adopt a multi pronged approach to try to promote sexual rights in the legal, public and social skills combining advocacy, public awareness raising, and political discussions on the issue; the need for information and knowledge, as well as building and sustaining solidarity and collaboration efforts; and the urgent need for law reform on issues relating to sexuality, and in particular joining forces to push for penal code reforms. Another significant emerging need from the concluding session was the necessity to create open spaces like this meeting on the national level to enable progressive and empowering debates on sexuality and to promote sexual rights.

***Please find below an excerpt from an interview with Ahlem Belhadj, one of the founders of Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) and the chair of the steering committee for the conference. The interview was originally conducted for the “Amargi Feminist Journal” in Turkey.***

**A meeting on sexuality was held in Tunisia. What is the significance of this?**

This conference means a breaking of the silence. Yes, for the first time, we were able to discuss sexuality freely. It was a first for even Tunisian feminists, who were able to discuss sexuality openly for the first time. Even ATFD, who has been involved in sexuality work and has had many internal discussions, found such an open and public environment to discuss sexuality for the first time. The fact that there was international participation was very enriching as well. Seeing the communalities and differences, makes one take a more holistic perspective.

**Why sexuality?**

We work on sexuality in Tunisia and see firsthand that many power mechanisms function through the regulation of sexuality, which is still a taboo through various constructions of what is sacred, shameful, decent etc. We conducted a research in Tunisia, on the major problems women face. 90% of women have problems in the domain of sexuality. A large majority of them can't have an orgasm. There are those subject to violence, outcast, those robbed of their freedom and who have to suppress themselves. Women asked us to prioritize this issue first. And then there are youth... They really need to discuss sexuality. Because they are stuck between the changing life styles and social values, they are confused. This is why the young women in ATFD worked so hard for this conference. At the same time, the rising of a new global neoconservatism and religious ideologies force us to urgently advocate for sexual rights.

**Have you had difficulties organizing this conference?**

How could we have not? Of course we did. No NGO has been allowed to hold a public event in Tunisia for three years. We are under great pressure in general. Of course since our country puts on a show of secularism and modernity, it does not always use oppression overtly. Instead it only reverts to not giving permission, leaving no room to act, keeping us under surveillance, pressuring us... I say “only”, but this is why not a single leaf has stirred in Tunisia for the past three years. But we were determined. We would move the leaves, the branches. And we'd do this on the issue of sexuality. We struggled for a very long time, met with the Women's Ministry, public agencies who claim to work on women's issues, and tried to collaborate with them to the extent possible. We are a women's organization that works on sexual violence and a counselling center women come to all the time. By insisting that we need to develop ourselves, that we do a lot of valuable work, we made it impossible for them to refuse us. Finally we announced that we wanted to organize a conference. First they told us they would provide us with the space, but they backed out at the very last minute. We could not find a single meeting space at the city center. Nobody would provide a venue for a conference, seminar, or panel. Finally we were able to find a touristic hotel outside the city. We resolved the issue of funding together with our co-organizer WWHR-New Ways. Until the very last minute before the meeting, we were all thinking “it will be cancelled at the last minute.” We thought they would barricade the entrance like they did a year ago with the Mediko meeting. The tension increased when we learned that the government had refused our Egyptian and Jordanian participants visas and they could not come. And our Palestinian friend could not make it due to harassment from the Israeli police. These are the conditions under which we held our meeting. And we succeeded! Participation was great despite the fact that we had to have it outside the city.

**Which issues were discussed? What were the priorities?**

The general issue of sexuality was still blurred. We needed discussions and definitions. There are different experiences and perspectives due to historical and social processes. It should be discussed from a feminist perspective and a human rights perspective. We tried to combine the two and I think we took a step forward in this. The obstacles in social, cultural, and legal domains were also explored in the meeting, and we developed common goals. Sexuality which is often linked to reproduction and the

family, was explored as a rights and a space of pleasure. This is very significant. We discussed those who face particular problems due to their position in the social hierarchy. Sex work was discussed very openly and intensely for the first time. But the biggest progress was made on the issue of sexual orientation. I think this was the first discussion on the existence and invisibility of lesbian women in Tunisia.

### **And the outcome?**

We've engaged in all these discussions to change the world and our lives... And in the end we devised a strategy. Of course what is even more important is that we initiated a debate in Tunisia on sexuality. We've opened a gate. We don't have all the answers yet, but so many questions are out in the open for the very first time... As we are seeking the own answers more roads will open up.

### **What was the role of international solidarity as you were organizing this meeting?**

We found the courage to organize a meeting on sexuality because of international solidarity. ATFD is one of the founders and active members of the *Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies*. As NGOs from Lebanon, Palestine, Algeria, Jordan and many more countries, we have a strong solidarity network. We discussed our idea for this meeting initially with the Coalition. We shared experiences, resources and that's how we were able to undertake this meeting. Of course the greatest support came from one of the founders of the Coalition, WWHR-New Ways, who co-organized this meeting with us. If it weren't for the solidarity of the Coalition, it would have been much more difficult for us to do this.

### **You are one the co-founders of the *Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies*. How did you decide to create such a network?**

We had seen on many occasions that there are big similarities between the realities of women in Muslim societies. While all sorts of politics against women are being devised by international alliances, we can't develop our own common strategies. This is what we observed. Patriarchy works on the global scale. International powers are taking joint decisions on women's issues. We need to resist this. When we realized this need, we turned to look at one another.

### **How did the Coalition's efforts evolve?**

We first exchanged experiences among ourselves. We realized that the more we looked at each other, the more we saw of ourselves and we grew stronger. As we got to know each other better, we started to collaborate on small scales. Then things we were doing accumulated and needed a structure. And we built this structure in Istanbul. The Istanbul meeting organized by WWHR-New Ways brought together 19 participants from various countries of the Middle East and North Africa. The decision to start a network came from that meeting. First we started a mail group, then we started to take joint actions against obstacles arising in many of our countries. And we saw that our solidarity, our foundation had grown strong. Sharing our experiences –both political and theoretical- really affected all of us struggling in our own national contexts. We all changed and became more radical with the Coalition. Our Coalition expanded to South/Southeast Asia with time, now we work as two separate networks in collaboration with one another. We can have an impact on the United Nations level, and act on the international scale. Things which once seemed so difficult to us, now feel much more easier...