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### Oral Interview: Contextualizing the Women's Rights Movement in Tunisia Through Family History

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## Oral Interview Project - Transcript and Reflection

### Contextualizing the Women's Rights Movement in Tunisia Through Family History

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CORE101001

Dr. Gretchen Mcclough

#### I. Interview Transcript:

For this project, I chose to interview my aunt. She is 64 years old and knows a lot about our family history. I asked her to tell me about instances of underage marriage, forced marriage, and women's oppression in the family. The interview was conducted on December 18th, 2020 in Tunis.

- Aunt: Personally, a man named Raouf saw me in Ksar Hellal [our hometown] and he liked me. He went to my uncle and asked him for my hand. My father told me that I am obligated to marry him because he asked my uncle for my hand and my uncle does not have children. I was not allowed to say no because he asked my uncle for my hand.
- Me: I don't understand the correlation between your uncle not having children and you having to marry that man. Can you tell me more about that?
- A: I went to my uncle's house in Kssar Hellal [from Tunis, where they moved to], and when Raouf saw me and he liked me, he asked my uncle for my hand. I called my father and told him about this, he told me they asked your uncle for your hand and he doesn't have children, so you say yes.

- M: So it's because your uncle would not have another opportunity to give someone's hand in marriage, right?
- A: Yes, exactly. So they'd tell me to be careful, not go out, not see boys, not come home late. And bam! Once someone asks for your hand, you say yes.
- M: These are the things they used to tell you before getting married?
- A: Yes, but our dad was kind of flexible. We would spend our summers in the beach house and wear whatever we wanted then, but not at school. You don't wear short skirts and you don't let your hair down. Oh, and of course you don't listen to Umm Kulthum.
- M: What? Why?
- A: Because it means you are in love.
- M: Why don't they want you to be in love?
- A: It's disgraceful, shameful, haram. How dare you?
- M: How old would you be when you'd hear these words?
- A: Around 15 or 16 years old. I was born in 1956 so let's say this is the 70's. Oh and this man who my dad wanted me to marry, he'd write me letters and so I was obliged to write him back. He'd send me back my letters as if he was a teacher correcting my copy. What's underlined in green isn't a huge problem but what's underlined in red is a huge mistake. He'd correct it in the margins and it's like: what's in green is okay it's tolerable but what's in red? Very serious mistake.

- M: So in the end they didn't marry you to him?
- A: Well yeah I went to my uncle, showed him the letters, and said this man is crazy. In the end, he's the one who wasn't satisfied with me. [laughing] I didn't get a good enough grade. He said I was too spoiled. But, he said because I gave my word to marry you I will but you will be like a vase in the house.
- M: What did he mean by that?
- A: Like an object in the house, he didn't want to marry me but because he gave his word he will marry me and keep me as a vase in the house.
- M: What did he mean by spoiled?
- A: Well, because he was an orphan who struggled in life and he saw me as the daughter of Tunis, I seemed too spoiled for him.
- M: You told me about your grandmother being forced into marriage at around 14, right?
- A: Yes, she told us that she would hold her doll and run around the table while he would run after her to try and sleep with her. That is what she told us. She did not even get her periods yet although she was 14 at the time. Afterwards, she gave birth to my mother, but she got a divorce, that's bizarre.
- M: How old was she when she had your mother?
- A: Around 15 or 16.
- M: And when did she get a divorce?

- A: Very soon after. But now that I think about it, that was very weird for her time. Let's see, well he got married to 3 women after her, and he died when my mother was 3 or 4 years old. So it was very quick, I think she must have gotten the divorce after a year or two of marriage. But she was probably only able to get a divorce because her uncle was Bourguiba [the leader of Tunisia's movement towards Independence and, starting in 1956, the first President]. Otherwise, how could a woman get a divorce at the time?
- M: What era was that approximately?
- A: Around 1931 or 1932. I'm sure if her uncle wasn't a national leader then she wouldn't be able to get the divorce she wanted to get. He was only a social figure at the time but that probably had its weight.
- M: What about my late aunt, E.? You told me she had a similar story.
- A: Yes but it was in 1973 or 1974 so it's very recent. E. was a rebel, she wanted to go out and go on dates so they married her off to a lousy man. To break her ego, they forced her to get married to a man she did not like. As a result, she spent 9 years without having children.
- M: How was she a rebel?
- A: She would get beaten up and still go out again. They'd catch her because she went out, beat her up, and she'd go out again. At the time, a girl couldn't go out. Even for her to go to school was very progressive.
- M: When you say go out, what do you mean? A walk at 3pm?

- A: No, she'd go to clubs, to see her boyfriend, things like that. Well they weren't aware of what she'd do outside, to them, she went out and that's enough to scold her. She was only really allowed to go to school and back home. What's really sad about this is that she was really beautiful. The man who asked for her hand was very ugly and clueless. He was shy, foolish, and very unenthusiastic. I think that's the bigger problem, they had different energies. She was so excited and energetic while he could make you fall asleep while talking. But, when they were alone, he became a devil. He'd break things and beat her up just because he was angry that day.
- M: Generally, why would he beat her up?
- A: Because she didn't want to sleep with him, because she didn't want to visit his mother, things like that. He traumatized everyone with his shenanigans. See? They destroyed her, shattered her ego, because she was a rebel who wanted to go out and was not into school. She preferred reading books, sewing, and laughing. She loved laughing and having fun. When this happened, she ran back to Ksar Hellal and they told me to bring her back from there. The day she got married, it happened in her room and she was crying. Our two older brothers had to force her into the room because she didn't want to. But really, no one realized how bad this was. For all of us, it was very clear that because the father gave his word she had to do it. That's why they corrected themselves with me. It was my older brother who saved me from that crazy man Raouf. He refused to give him my hand after all. He told our father he'd take care of me until I wanted to marry someone.
- M: You ended up getting a divorce in the 90's, why didn't Emel do that as well?

- A: She did have 9 years without children when she could get a divorce. It was different for me, I studied and had my job [middle school biology teacher]. But, in a sense, Emel did find more freedom in being married regardless of the foolishness of her husband. And if she got a divorce at the time, she would lose her freedom and be back in our family's house. She'd become a "divorced woman", a disgrace, she wouldn't have been able to go out of the house at all. This was around the 70's.
- M: And when was she born?
- A: In 1953, that's the new era, but it's still a case by case thing. Like, my female cousins could go out, travel, and study abroad. That's it, starting in the 50's, everything changed.
- M: So, what was the difference between our family and your cousins' family?
- A: Because our cousins' mother was S.S. A strong woman who'd force her opinion on her husband.
- M: So who was strict with you? Your mom or your dad?
- A: S., our brother. Our mother was flexible but she just didn't like taboos like being seen with a boy. Maybe if it wasn't for our older brother she'd have given us more freedom. As long as you let her know, you can go out. With our dad there were rules but our older brother was the one to keep an eye on us. And to tell you more, at the same time, I had another cousin, the daughter of C. who participated in protests and everything. Even though her mother was an emancipated woman, she'd still get beaten up by her brothers. So it was the same family but the brothers controlled her anyway.

- M: Back to S.S. and her daughters who studied abroad, what made you mention her full name?  
  
A: She was the niece of Bourguiba and they had already started the movement. S.S. was a force, they could teach you a whole lesson about her. She's someone who knew how to impose herself and use her position in a political way.
- M: What else can you tell me about this topic?
- A: If you're going to talk about women who get raped by their husbands, it's still happening. Women who get beaten up by their husbands, too. But before, if she wasn't obedient enough he'd send her to that house, Dar Joued [an establishment similar to a prison, for disobedient women to learn a skill until their husbands take them back]. It's still there, you can find it in the Medina. Some women would be so young that they had no idea what was going on, they'd get beaten up just for their husbands to rape them. She was his property.
- M: When did Dar Joued close? Before the Independence?
- A: I think after the Independence, I'm not sure. But even my cousins would go to school to learn how to be more obedient and better housewives. They learn to sew, to cook, to wash their husband's feet.
- M: Yeah, it's only after 1993 that the Code of Personal Status was ratified to remove the wife's obligation to obedience.
- A: True, he's the one who spends on the family and she can't make decisions about finances. But you know, women always get the upper hand no matter what. There were

women who were more emancipated. My mother, for example, went to school. That's why I told you our example is very different from other families at the time.

- M: I still think it's important to hear this, even if it comes from a privileged point of view. Maybe financially privileged.
- A: Oh no, not at all. It depends on so many other things. For example, people in Tunis were more progressive than people in the Sahel, and we're Sahel people who moved to Tunis. Don't forget that openness started with the Beys [Tunisian Pre-Independence Monarchs] in Tunis. Forced marriage and scolding were maybe more soft over there. It's very complicated.
- M: What about my cousin A., we have the impression that her wedding was very traditional, why is that?
- A: Well, she wears the Niqab, so even if her wedding was a couple of years ago it still feels regressive. I imagine she has to wear it to take out the trash. But now she's doing better with her husband, they took the time to get to know each other, don't forget that they're both young.
- M: They got to know each other after the wedding, right?
- A: Well of course, he saw her and liked that she was a Niqabi, so he sent his mother to look for her and when she met A. she told him she was beautiful. He went ahead and asked for her hand from her father. She is very beautiful.
- M: How old was she?

- A: Around 19 years old, and she got pregnant right after. Maybe her religious beliefs tell her contraception is forbidden. I'm not sure.
- M: Thank you so much for this interview. It's exactly what I was looking for. I know you think these aren't good examples because the women in our family had it easier than others, but even these stories can give perspective to my topic. Thank you.

## **II. Reflection:**

In their path towards emancipation and equal rights, Tunisian women have gone through a number of phases that seem to be directly linked to legal changes and cultural factors. In fact, the Code of Personal Status (CPS) of 1956 seems to be a milestone in the women's movement, and its following amendments continued on this path. However, it is a lot more complex than that. A piece of legislation officially passing is not a simple determinant of the state of women's rights in a country. Through Dorra Mahfoudh Draoui's "Report on Gender and Marriage in Tunisian Society" and my interview with my aunt, it has become apparent to me that our evolution towards gender equality has been shaky but promising. In this reflection, I will explore this topic with a focus on marriage.

For a long time, romantic feelings have been labeled as shameful and inappropriate, even between married couples (Mahfoudh Draoui). My aunt confirmed this idea by stating that being in love was seen as "disgraceful, shameful, haram. How dare you?" hence why single women had to hide the fact they listened to Umm Kulthum. At the time, women were often forced into marriage by their family members, as my aunt almost was. She described how her father told her:

“They asked your uncle for your hand and he doesn’t have children, so you say yes.” In this case, I think my grandfather privileged his brother’s ability to give someone’s hand in marriage over my aunt’s ability to choose her own husband. It is a clear hierarchy of who matters (men) and who doesn’t (women) in the family.

Similarly, according to my aunt, her late sister “was a rebel, she wanted to go out and go on dates so they married her off to a lousy man. To break her ego, they forced her to get married to a man she did not like.” This is another instance of forced marriage, although it does have another layer: using marriage to control young women. Because my late aunt was going out regardless of how they scolded her, they deemed she had too big of an ego and needed to get married in order to learn to be obedient. One of the highlights of the interview, to me, came right after, when my aunt admitted to having helped force her sister into this marriage and said: “No one realized how bad this was. For all of us, it was very clear that because the father gave his word she had to do it.” This is particularly interesting because it shows that although a lot of what was going on was unethical and even cruel, culture and tradition made it seem to everyone involved as reasonable. No one saw that this was cruel because they grew up to believe that was how it had to go. It was only after the CPS was passed that women’s consent in marriage became a legal obligation (Mahfoudh Draoui). In fact, the CPS goes on to set in stone, through Article 23, that “both spouses must fulfill their conjugal duties in accordance with traditions and customs” giving women even more decisional power in regards to marriage. This article was ratified in 1993 to remove a previous obligation for wives to be obedient to their husbands. Instead, it now encourages cooperation between spouses in the conduct of family affairs and the upbringing of children (Article 23, Code of Personal Status). These two milestones in Tunisian legislation changed everything regarding this matter. Now, women were not only able to refuse

marriage, they were also closer to being their husbands' equals in the family.

Another topic that came up in the report and the interview is underage marriage. As my great grandmother was married off at only 14 years of age and, according to my aunt, she had her child at around 15 or 16. This was, according to my aunt, in "around 1931 or 1932." That was long before the CPS was passed, as its Article 5 set the legal age for marriage at 17 for women and 20 for men. It was ratified in 1964 and in 2007 to finally set the legal age of marriage at 18 for both sexes (Article 5, Code of Personal Status). This significantly reduced the rates of child brides, as it made it legally difficult (Mahfoudh Draoui) but not impossible: there is a breach in this Article that allows underage marriage "by virtue of a special authorization from the judge who will only grant it for serious reasons and in the best interests of both future spouses" (Article 5, Code of Personal Status).

Additionally, divorce was a prominent topic in the interview. We discussed how my late aunt did not get a divorce, although she legally could, because she "did find more freedom in being married regardless of the foolishness of her husband. And if she got a divorce at the time, she would lose her freedom and be back in our family's house." Here, we are talking about the 70's, long after the CPS gave divorce a legal aspect that would allow women to do it (Mahfoudh Draoui). On the other side of the spectrum, my great grandmother apparently got a divorce in the 30's and, according to my aunt, "if her uncle [Bourguiba] wasn't a national leader then she wouldn't be able to get the divorce she wanted to get. He was only a social figure at the time but that probably had its weight." Similarly, my aunt did get a divorce in the 90's and, according to her, the fact she was college educated and had a job made that a lot more feasible. My late aunt wasn't this lucky as she was more of a free spirit who disliked school which confined her to the private sphere. If she divorced her abusive husband, she would have gone from his house back to

my grandmother's house.

Finally, another thing that came up often in the interview was social and political figures, and how being related to them would allow a woman to do slightly better than others. For example, my great grandmother was able to get a divorce and my aunt's cousins could study abroad because their mother was S.S. who, according to my aunt, was "a strong woman who'd force her opinion on her husband." Therefore, it seems that having a public figure in the family presented itself as a privilege in some cases, allowing women to break away from societal norms as best they could at the time. It is also important to point out that my family is from Ksar Hellal, a town close to Bourguiba's hometown and, therefore, connections to him were more present than in other families. Women in my family seem to have benefitted, directly and indirectly, from these connections and from having moved to Tunis.

All in all, the women's movement in Tunisia was heavily influenced by legislation and cultural mutations. Marriage, divorce, and decisional power for women evolved through time with the evolution of these factors. My aunt, however, insists that this is a case by case situation. No matter the year, the social status, the financial means, each woman had to live through different circumstances in an almost arbitrary manner. Although Tunisia did not yet attain true gender equality and "women did not yet escape gender-based violence and other discriminations" (Mahfoudh Draoui 140), we seem to be on the right track. New legislation is still passing in recent years to help us get there, such as law 2017-58 of the Penal Code to eliminate violence against women. Clearly, the Tunisian women's movement is not over yet.

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