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French Female Managers from North African origin: an integration “à la française”

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The integration process of migrants from a different culture is an important subject in developed countries, especially in France. Due to its colonial past, France has welcomed many workers from North Africa since the 60s. This first generation was composed of non-skilled workers who occupied jobs mostly in the industrial sector. This immigration was supposed to be temporary and the immigrants, mostly men, were not supposed to become French let alone be integrated in French society. However, after several years, most of these workers arranged the immigration of their spouses and founded households in France. This settlement was not really anticipated in France and from the early 80s onward, the integration of those new French citizens became a political priority.

In our research, we assumed that the integration of the second generation of French North African immigrants can be compared with one that was the subject of a previous study we conducted: a study of the integration of female managers in the Gulf. After various reforms by local Governments it had become easier for women to raise in the social scale in those countries (Lacheret, 2020; Lacheret and Farooq, 2021).

These women negotiated small steps to obtain spaces of freedom and eventually they could obtain the job they had chosen. Afterward, the father's conservative values became more flexible eventually becoming proud of his daughter and trying to promote this empowerment process himself. This way of progressively changing the conservative values of their own family is what we can call a “social non-movement” (Bayat, 2013): many actors adopt the same behaviour and change some values in their neighbourhood without concerted movement. This leads to a global change of the values of an entire society.

We wanted to compare this process of change conducted in the Gulf countries with the integration of young female managers of the second generation of North African immigration in France. These women were raised in relatively poor conditions, most of time with fathers employed as unskilled labour workers and with non-working mothers. Moreover, most of the interviewees in the study said that their families had difficulties speaking French and had conservative values, especially with regard to the place of women in the society.

Despite these obstacles, the integration rates of the second generation are impressive. According to statistics, 11% of foreigners who arrived before 1974 in France had a university degree. In 2010, for 22% of the daughters of workers of Algerian origin, had a university degree and 31% of those who were of Tunisian and Moroccan origin. The number of university graduates in France today is 34%. In one generation, women have almost attained the average education level of the French population.

Therefore, we wanted to ask them how they had managed to move upwards on the scale so quickly. We interviewed 23 women and conducted the same qualitative interview with the female managers from the Gulf, The Gulf study was inspired an existing study run of Muslim female managers of South Asian origin in Great Britain (Syed & Tariq, 2017).

Our main findings, which will be published in a book in November 2021, are that the integration process is partly comparable to the one of the Gulf female managers. Both studies demonstrate a kind of a negotiation process with the family and especially with the reluctant fathers; and once the

daughter's freedom of choice is obtained, the parents become less conservative and more integrated, too.

The main difference between both samples consists in the fact that the social origins are not the same: Gulf families are part of the upper middle class and educated while in France, the first generation of migrants is often uneducated and very poor. Therefore, in France, even if the families eventually become convinced of the need to study and to apply for qualified jobs, the families do not have the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, Putnam, 2000) to help their daughters once the latter have started following higher education.

A further finding sheds light on the fact that the families' conservative behaviours subsist in the French case, especially in private life. For example, we were told, during the interviews, of many attempts of forced or arranged marriage. However, the most important thing is that the women interviewed were blaming far more their backward qualified culture of origins for misfortunes than their religion. In that sense, the responses are similar to those of their Gulf counterparts as they explain that the main obstacle for their empowerment is the conservative traditions and not the religion.

In conclusion, our study states that integration processes have to be accompanied by the public authorities not by on over focusing on religion because religion does not appear as a significant obstacle to integration, but rather on cultural and social issues such as avoiding ghettos, promoting more social diversity at school and, last but not least, defining precisely what kind of values French society has in order to be able to promote them to the second and third generation of immigrants.

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