

# Ensuring the rights of women

## INTERVIEW WITH SIHEM BADI

MINISTER OF WOMEN'S AFFAIRS



**SIHEM BADI** studied medicine in Tunis and was an activist before being sentenced to two years in prison for having condemned the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. She went into exile in Paris, where she completed a PhD in Medicine. Following the 2011 Revolution, she was appointed Minister for Women's Affairs. She is a member of the CPR Party.

### What are the main priorities of your ministry?

Our ministry is responsible for women, the elderly, families and children. We cooperate with other ministries such as employment, health, education and culture, and also have a very important international role. As a ministry we formulate new strategies and projects. The projects related to children are especially focused on integrating them with the families and with society. We seek to combat poverty and literacy, and provide social justice and employment for women, especially in rural areas. We also seek more participation for women in public life as well as encouraging the empowerment of women, which is very important for the economic development of our country. As for the elderly, we look to enhance and improve their living conditions, but also to take advantage of their competencies and expertise so that they can participate in the construction of the new Tunisia. We also have a complete and exhaustive family strategy, which includes combating violence against women and the construction of shelters to house the victims of domestic violence. Our priorities are to tackle the problem of young girls dropping out of education by training them and enhancing their economic independence.

### What is the difference between the role and status of women before the Revolution, and that which you are now looking to encourage?

Before the revolution the rights of women was just a slogan. Today we have surveys and studies that give us a good picture of the status of women in recent years – which were not published before, as it was inconvenient for the previous regime. Now we have a more pragmatic vision about the role of women. We try to publish real statistics that give the real picture of the situation. In our new constitution we will guarantee the rights of women as equal participants of all aspects of life.

### How do Islamic values fit with the role of women in society?

We do not want extremism when it comes to women's affairs; neither Islamic extremism nor extreme feminism. We want to harmonise Islam, our culture, our history as well as being open to other cultures and civilisations. We want to institute a participative democracy, where all Tunisian women have a role to play and are involved in all aspects of society. Until now we have not had a problem with Islam and women. With education, culture and media we aim to institute a moderate Islam in Tunisia. There must be mutual respect between those who are closer to their Islamic values and those who are more secular. Having a citizenship culture is important, and we have training about women and citizenship which includes a dialogue between all parties.

### You spent much of your time as a political refugee in Paris. What did you learn about women's rights in a democracy while in Europe?

I was impressed by the strong civil society in Europe, where the government does a lot of work in close proximity with its citizens. I have learned that civil society is a lot about activism and lobbying. I have also learnt that many civilisations can meet and live together in peace.

### What kind of rights, in your view should a woman have in post Revolution Tunisia?

The real woman is one that is educated, self confident, has a role in society and has no conflict with men. Women can succeed in things that men fail in. It is important that men have confidence in women, trust in them, and not take them as their rivals.

