WOMEN’S GRASSROOTS MOBILIZATION IN THE MENA REGION POST–2011

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INTRODUCTION

There have been significant legislative reforms pertaining to women’s rights in countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in the last several decades. In Morocco, important revisions were made to the family code (Mudawana) in 2004, granting women further equality in areas including marriage, divorce, and family responsibility, and Turkey amended its civil code in 2001, addressing biases that had led to gender inequality in private life. Numerous countries in the region also adopted various forms of gender quotas that sought to mandate the election of women to parliaments. Despite critical advancements, many challenges remain. One difficulty facing women’s rights groups is ensuring the effective implementation of laws, and another is changing patriarchal mentalities and cultural norms around women’s economic and societal roles.

As the following briefs make clear, legislative change is not enough, nor is mandated representation. Evidence from other regions even suggests that mandating the formal participation of women in political positions can lead to the co-optation of women into autocratic systems of governance, or to a backlash against female politicians and a regression of women’s rights. As such, grassroots mobilization on a variety of topics related to women’s rights—from ending sexual harassment and domestic violence to ending gender discrimination in inheritance laws—has continued from below in order to put pressure on governments, institutions, and societies. While there was a heightened international focus on women’s social movements in 2011 as uprisings swept the MENA region, less attention has been paid to women’s grassroots mobilization in the subsequent decade.

The briefs that follow address many facets of women’s mobilization in the second decade of the 2000s. Using detailed case studies of specific countries and movements, the contributing authors—who include scholars and activists from Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Turkey, Palestine, and Jordan—examine which spaces for women’s mobilization have opened and which have closed off. They look critically at how women’s grassroots movements become adopted into formal politics and policy, and to what effect. Lastly, they question the nexus between social movements and outcomes such as legislative reform, asking how—even in cases of successful mobilization—participants are able to develop measures that ensure the transformation of demands into law and effective implementation.

Yamina El Kirat outlines the history of women’s movements in Morocco since independence, arguing that while earlier movements tended to be composed of highly educated women in urban locations, more recent mobilizations—such as the soulalyat movement or the Hirak Rif—have included, and even been instigated by, women from rural areas. Nonetheless, El Kirat concludes that Moroccan women’s movements continue to face many challenges in achieving their goals, which include reducing unemployment among Moroccan women, overcoming cultural barriers to gender equality, and improving women’s literacy.

Rabéa Naciri examines the Moroccan soulalyat movement in depth, explaining how predominantly rural women, with assistance from the Democratic Association of Women of Morocco (ADFM), managed to challenge the gendered system of land inheritance in place since the French Protectorate period. Through a series of testimonies gathered from soulalyats themselves, Naciri shows how the women’s perseverance and solidarity, helped along by the support and supervision of the ADFM, led to a new law in 2019 that guarantees both men and women the right to benefit from communal lands.

Soumia Boutkhil focuses specifically on women’s employment in higher education in Morocco, pointing out that Moroccan universities severely lack female representation at all levels. Boutkhil analyzes institutional barriers to women’s advancement in this key public sector, noting that while academics at the Université Mohammed Premier in Oujda created the Association of Women University Professors in 2016 as a key first step to mobilizing around this issue, many reforms are needed in order to mitigate a negative impact on future generations who are at risk of internalizing the extant patriarchal system.
In the Tunisian context, Khedija Arfaoui argues that while women’s mobilization has a long and prominent history in Tunisia leading to numerous gains in the area of women’s rights, women have not yet reached the fully equal status they have struggled for. Despite the 2011 revolution, Arfaoui asserts that many of former President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s repressive laws remain as an obstacle to women’s advancement, though she highlights recent examples of successful social movements, particularly in the area of anti-sexual harassment campaigns.

Looking at Turkey, Ayşe Ayata discusses the challenges that secular women’s movements have faced in recent years as a result of the ruling Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) dismissal of gender equality and the party’s support of conservative women’s groups. Ayata focuses on three central issues that constitute the main agenda for the women’s movement in Turkey in recent years—domestic violence, alimony, and child marriage—arguing that the pushback against gender equality is neither specific to Turkey, nor to the MENA region, but is instead reflective of global anti-gender movements.

Hayat Wahab Arslan draws on her personal involvement in Lebanese women’s movements to argue that women’s political empowerment must be accompanied by economic empowerment, outlining the ways in which her organization—the Society of Lebanon the Giver—helped women in rural areas achieve economic independence and encouraged their participation in local governance. While acknowledging that Lebanon is still far behind achieving women’s political participation in line with international recommendations, Arslan argues that positive developments were visible in the 2018 elections, which saw an unprecedented number of female candidates run for office.

In Jordan, Amal El-Kharouf focuses on a disheartening contradiction: Jordanian women have impressively high levels of educational achievement, yet their economic participation rate was just 15.4% in 2018, compared to 55.9% for men. El-Kharouf highlights a number of reforms that the Jordanian government has taken over the last two decades to help improve women’s labor market participation, but ultimately argues that strong political will and further reforms are needed to help Jordanian women achieve participation that is in line with their educational achievement.

Finally, in the Palestinian context, Islah Jad suggests that the “NGO-ization” of women’s organizations since the 1990s has negatively impacted their mobilization potential, resulting in projects and policies that are not necessarily reflective of the broad demands and needs of Palestinian women. Jad argues that this process has empowered NGOs with strong international ties that are adept at speaking to the desires of donors and elites, at the expense of formerly strong grassroots organizations that were more in touch with women’s social, economic, and political reality.

This compilation is based on the “Women’s Grassroots Mobilization in the MENA Region Post-2011” workshops held in Rabat, Morocco and Amman, Jordan in February and March 2020. Thank you to Mohammed Masbah, director of the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis, and Barbara A. Porter, director of the American Center for Oriental Research, for hosting the workshops in Rabat and Amman, respectively. In addition to the authors and hosts, I would also like to thank Saloua Zerhouni, professor at Mohammed V University; Mohammed El Hachimi, professor at CERSS and advisor to the president of the National Human Rights Council of Morocco; and Andre Bank, senior research fellow at GIGA, for their participation and feedback at the workshops, which greatly contributed to the discussion around these critical topics. Lydia Wells, a master of global affairs student at Rice University, also provided invaluable assistance in the planning and execution of the workshops and the editing of the briefs. The workshops were funded with the generous support of the Kelly Day Endowment as part of the Baker Institute’s program on Women’s Rights, Human Rights and Refugees.

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Gender Matters: Women as Actors of Change and Sustainable Development in Morocco

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In comparison to other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the Moroccan government has implemented a considerable number of reforms to improve women’s rights, including a gender quota for parliamentary elections, a revision of the Family Code (the Mudawana), a reform of the constitution, a law allowing women to pass nationality to their children, an amendment of the rape law, and a law criminalizing gender-based violence. Despite these reforms, women’s rights and gender equality have not improved; most of the changes exist on paper, and the legal measures have not been implemented well.

HISTORY OF MOROCCAN WOMEN’S INVOLVEMENT IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Moroccan women have been integral to the country’s development through their role in its independence movement, its democratization, and in various social justice movements. Unfortunately, women were not heavily involved in nation-building post-independence, and the 1962 Mudawana further codified patriarchy into law. It legalized polygamy, established the marriage age at 15 for women and 18 for men, and institutionalized tutelage—or guardianship—in marriage.

The U.N. Decade for Women and the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women helped encourage the Moroccan feminist movement, leading to the launch of feminist journals including Lamalif and Thamanya Mars in 1983. In the 1990s, women mobilized around the issue of reforming the Mudawana. In 1992, a petition was signed by one million Moroccans, and in 1999, large demonstrations were held in Rabat and Casablanca. The reforms to the Mudawana were officially adopted in 2004.

The 20 February Movement, associated with the regional uprisings known as the “Arab Spring,” began with the twenty-year-old anonymous journalist student, Amina Boughalbi. Her message—“I am Moroccan and I will march on the 20th of February because I want freedom and equality for all Moroccans”—mobilized several thousand, mainly young, Moroccan men and women. Most of the people who reacted to the call were not active feminists and had no affiliation with any feminist organization. Nonetheless, women were present at all levels of this movement; they experienced police cruelty and represented the movement nationally and internationally. The activists believed that women’s rights would be better realized by working together with men towards mutual goals, rather than isolating women’s issues specifically. Thus, the slogans of the movement and its demands were largely gender neutral. The movement was therefore perceived as a new form of feminism, wherein both men and women were fighting for the same claims.
**MOVEMENT DEMOGRAPHICS: AN URBAN/RURAL DIVIDE**

The majority of women involved in the 20 February Movement, as well as most of the participants in previous women’s movements, were educated and thus unrepresentative of the country’s demographics. The national female illiteracy rate in Morocco is about 44%; 35% among urban women and 61% among rural women. Further, 22% of rural women do not receive any formal education. The economic inequality gap is therefore very wide among women in Morocco. The unemployment rate among women and their lack of access to services in rural areas hinders their potential to join the labor force or to change their situations. The eradication of illiteracy is thus necessary to improve gender equality and women’s rights.

Although the activists of the 20 February Movement were more educated than the average Moroccan woman, they did express concern about the inequality between elite and illiterate women. The movement also provided an opportunity for women to move into traditionally masculine public spaces. Since then, more women have publicly expressed that the interpretation of Islamic texts, culture, and traditions reduced their status, rather than Islam itself. Even illiterate women now utilize male-dominated spaces to denounce injustice and to ask for the rights adopted in the new Family Code and constitution.

Importantly though, rural women have not been absent from mobilization in Morocco, even if they have fewer resources with which to demand their rights. A rural grassroots movement began in 2007 by women known as the soulalyats, who were demanding rights to land ownership. The movement was sparked by a soulalyat woman from Kénitra whose male family members sold and profited off of her ancestral land. The soulalyat grassroots movement forced the government to give the women formal access to land. After a long struggle, a series of laws (62–17, 63–17 and 64–17) were promulgated for the management of collective lands, guaranteeing the soulalyats’ right to communal land. In fact, 128 hectares were distributed to 867 women, who have since maintained control over the land. The movement initiated a country-wide discussion about collective lands as national heritage, revealing the complexity of their management. The soulalyats prompted the government to ensure concrete solutions to this issue.

Another example of rural mobilization and the largest protest movement in Morocco since 2011 emerged in the same vein as the 20 February Movement. Known as the Hirak Rif or the Rif Movement, it took place in the Berber-speaking Rif region of northern Morocco between October 2016 and June 2017 as a result of the death of Mohcine Fikri. A woman named Nawal Ben Alish played a key role in the protests after the arrest of Naser Zafzafi, the leader of the movement, and many mothers and wives of prisoners also participated. These women, the majority of whom are illiterate and Amazigh monolinguals, have become important actors of change.

Better access to technology and social media has allowed more women to participate across the socioeconomic spectrum as citizen journalists. Protesting has become a daily activity, with women documenting and sharing acts of injustice on social media. Women who were kept silent for decades denounce rape, sexual harassment, child abuse, and domestic violence on Facebook and YouTube. The Masaktach (“I won’t be silent”) Movement is a new and ambitious example of these protests, as it denounces rape on Facebook. Public spaces are also now available for mobilization; women demonstrate in front of hospitals, schools, public administration buildings, and parliament. Women have therefore become very visible in the public eye, taking initiatives to participate not only in movements that concern women’s rights, but also in issues that concern the general public. The historic and present-day mobilization of Moroccan women reveals that women can play a key role in the sustainable development of their country.
WOMEN’S RIGHTS: A LONG WAY TO GO

Despite these inspiring accomplishments, the implementation of new laws is very slow, with no subsequent review. For example, a closer look at the changes introduced in the new Family Code reveals a lack of enforcement. Child marriage has almost doubled in one decade, from 7% in 2004 to nearly 12% in 2013. Polygamy experienced a similar trend, although to a lesser degree: in 2010, nearly 43.41% of applications for polygamy were accepted.

The implementation of the constitutional provision on gender equality has also been very slow. As Lamrabet argues, even though Article 19 of the Constitution gives equality to women, the practice of equality “does not and will not exist unless the hearts and minds of people are changed” and unless the politicians change. Indeed, there were no awareness campaigns surrounding the new Family Code, and the education system did not support it. The judges who passed the law hold the same patriarchal beliefs about women’s status, due to their interpretation of religious texts. Based on research conducted regarding gender issues in Morocco, cultural traditions and the misinterpretation of religious texts have contributed to women’s subordination. The patriarchal misinterpretation of Islam should therefore be reconsidered, with the inclusion of female Muslim scholars, in order for the new Family Code to positively impact women.

Despite the ratification of international conventions and the establishment of entities such as the Equality and Parity Commission, only 22% of women held positions of power in public administration in 2016, and 81 out of 395 deputies serving in parliament are currently women. Obviously, in practice, the situation has not drastically changed. The 2002 gender quotas were a crucial step towards the consolidation of democracy and a means with which to fight against the patriarchal elements of society; however, their impact on women’s status has been minimal, as the political parties are not adhering to the quota.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The empowerment of women as effective actors of sustainable development in Moroccan society would require more reforms and goals, including the following:

Reduction of poverty among women by prioritizing literacy, guaranteeing education, and facilitating access to jobs. Literacy programs are a key step, particularly for women who are beyond schooling age, as 14.8% of girls aged 15 to 24 are illiterate, and about seven out of 10 rural women are illiterate, i.e., 67.4% compared to 36.2% for urban women and 37.2% for rural men. Education will also help reduce poverty, as a lack of education accounts for 36.8% of poverty among adults and 24% among children. Education is especially important for girls in rural areas, as one in 10 girls aged 7 to 12 in rural areas do not attend school. Unemployment remains a major issue. According to figures from the Higher Planning Commission in Morocco, the employment rate for women was 22.2% overall and 70.4% for rural women. Almost 39.3% of employed women work without pay compared to only 9.5% of men. For rural women, this figure is closer to 70%. The national female employment rate declined from 26.8% in 2013 to 22.2% in 2019.

Promote and implement the Equality and Parity policy and encourage women’s access to decision-making positions. Only about 6% of Moroccan women hold decision-making positions.

Guarantee access to health services for women. Maternal health in rural areas is particularly important, as the rural maternal mortality rate remains twice as high as the urban rate. About 20.4% of pregnant women did not receive any antenatal consultations in rural areas in 2018, compared to 4.4% in urban areas.

Reform the Family Code of 2004. Female Muslim scholars should be included in the reinterpretation of the Quran and the revision of the Family Code. The new reform should be more focused and should clarify laws around early marriage and polygamy.

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The inheritance law should also be revised, as more women are now sole providers for their families.

**Implement the gender budgeting policy.**
Despite the state’s adoption of the gender approach in resource distribution within the budget, the situation has not changed significantly.

**Establish a culture of transparency** and a review of law implementation.

**Promote a culture of gender equality in schools.** Within school curriculum, stereotypes about women should be abolished, and the general representation of women should be reviewed.

**Promote a culture of gender equality through media awareness campaigns** such as the valorization of women’s success stories in advertisements. Awareness campaigns focusing on female equality should not be limited to International Women’s Day. Moroccans should be made aware of the value of empowering women to act as full members of society.

**ENDNOTES**

1. The term “Arab Spring” is rejected in the region because it does not include the other ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, namely the Amazigh people, Copts, and others.


3. Examples of movements where women took the lead include the Hirak Rif, the Soulaliyat Movement, the “On the Road 96 Movement” (Imider), the Masaktach Movement, etc.


5. A 31-year-old fish seller, Mohcine Fikri was crushed to death in a rubbish bin on October 28, 2016 in Al Hoceima while trying to recover his confiscated merchandise.

6. A 36-year-old mother of four, Nawal Ben Aisha became the spokesperson for the protests, which were held every evening after the breaking of the Ramadan fast in Al Hoceima. She is now a political refugee in the Netherlands.

7. Droit & Justice, an organization promoting the rule of law in Morocco, found that of the 33,253 marriage contracts in 2009 and 35,152 in 2013, a total of 30,000 involved females under the age of 18.


10. I have supervised a number of doctoral theses on different gender issues—e.g., “Women’s Representation in the Moroccan Media,” “Gender Discourse after the Moudawana Reform,” “Women’s Representation in the Moroccan English Textbooks,” “Household Labour Division among Dual-Earner Couples,” “Women’s Political Participation,” and “Women’s Associations”—all of which have revealed that the status of women has not wholly improved.


12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE SERIES

This brief is part of a series on “Women’s Grassroots Mobilization in the MENA Region Post–2011.” The briefs were presented at workshops in Rabat, Morocco and Amman, Jordan in February and March 2020 hosted by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis and the American Center for Oriental Research and involving scholars and activists from Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Turkey, Palestine, and Jordan. The workshops were funded with the generous support of the Kelly Day Endowment as part of the Baker Institute’s program on Women’s Rights, Human Rights and Refugees.

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Cite as:
Moroccan women began mobilizing for their rights long before the country’s independence in 1956. However, between 1998 and 2003, a confrontation emerged between a pro-gender equality movement and a conservative movement, leading to the reform of the Personal Status Code (Mudawana) in 2004. This landmark reform involved many changes, including the requirement that spouses share responsibilities rather than obligating a wife’s obedience, the abolishment of marital guardianship for adult women, the establishment of a minimum age of 18 for marriage for both genders, and the implementation of new procedures to facilitate a woman’s right to divorce.

Emerging out of pressure from the feminist movement, new governmental reforms resulted in the recognition of the right of women to transmit their nationality to their children in 2007, the establishment of positive discrimination mechanisms in national and local elected offices, the revision of certain provisions of the penal code, and, finally, the adoption of a law combating violence against women in 2018. The 2011 constitutional reform also enshrined equality and parity between men and women in all fields.

However, these reforms—among the most advanced for Arab countries—have not helped to reduce large gender inequalities in many areas. By maintaining the obligation of the husband to provide for the needs of his wife, by not recognizing domestic work and care performed by women, and by continuing the practice of inheritance inequality, the 2004 Family Code preserved the economic and symbolic foundation of the patriarchal contract of Qiwâma.

Qiwâma, a system considered to be natural and divine, refers to a strict hierarchical distribution of tasks performed by men and women. It is endowed with such symbolic and cultural force that it goes beyond the framework of family relations to permeate the entire legal system and all public policies. Under this system, men are tasked with taking responsibility for their female relatives. Nevertheless, the old family and tribal order which guaranteed a certain security to women is disappearing. Various factors have reshaped the model of the traditional patriarchal family, including sharp declines in consanguineous marriages and fertility rates, the increase in urbanity, and the fact that people are getting married at younger ages. These changes have had an impact on the customs governing the management of collective lands in Morocco and have particularly impacted women, most of whom lack their own resources and are excluded from owning land.

THE ISSUE OF LAND INHERITANCE

Morocco has nearly 12 million hectares of land belonging to 4,631 ethnic communities (soulala), comprised of 2.5 million rights-holders. These lands are collective, undivided, and inalienable, and can either be assigned in shares allocated to rights-holders, or not assigned and operated on
behalf of the community. These lands represent the highest concentration of land in Morocco and present critical political, economic, and social issues.

After independence, Morocco did not break with the customary practices of the French Protectorate era, which, in most cases, did not recognize women as beneficiaries and excluded them from compensation after the transfer of land. As one soulalyat interviewee explained, “I am a widow, with a family of six children and no financial resources. I was convinced that God wanted it that way. My feelings of injustice were exacerbated on the eve of Eid al-Adha in 2007. My brother received 270,000 dirhams as compensation for the transfer of land and bought the most expensive sheep without paying attention to the needs of my family. Since then, I have sworn to take back my rights and those of my sisters, and that was the start.”—Mennana, Mehdia-Gharb

As this excerpt shows, the situation of the soulalyats could no longer be governed by customs or reliance on the goodwill of the representatives of the ethnic community— who were exclusively men.

THE UNPRECEDENTED SOULALYAT MOVEMENT

The momentum of reforms surrounding women’s rights in Morocco contributed to the emergence of the soulalyat movement beginning in 2007. Supported by the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women (known by its French acronym ADFM), the soulalyats formed groups in several regions to end the hogra—feels of injustice and humiliation—and began to confront their families, representatives of the tribe, and even local authorities to demand equality in land ownership and inheritance.

Often the strongest resistance came from family members. Several women found their male siblings vehemently opposed to granting them inheritance rights. “I helped my brother financially in his studies, but afterwards, he fiercely opposed my right to the usufruct of the land.”—Rkia, Haddaa-Gharb

“Right after my father died, my brothers asked me to renounce my rights following the ancestral example of the women of the tribe. When I dared to ask them why, the answer was: ‘this is how things work in the tribe. The woman is not even entitled to the private melk and now you raise the question of her right to collective lands.’ To claim my right, I spent two years staying all day outside the door of the Caïd without daring to enter because I was afraid that my family, informed of my attempt, would accuse me of having brought shame and dishonor on them.’”—Fatima, Meknes Region

The soulalyats movement is unprecedented in Morocco. Historically, women had no access to land, whether collective or privately-owned (melk). In general, they ceded their share to their male relatives so as not to be excluded from the family and the tribe. Male family members and tribal leaders thus felt threatened by the new demands of women. “The representatives of the Jmaâ told me: if you succeed in obtaining your rights, then you could wear the djellaba [traditional male dress] and the beard and we men, we will wear the caftan [traditional female dress]. At our age, we are not going to give rights to dogs.”—Zahra, Ait Ouahi–Moyen Atlas

Overcoming this prejudice and discrimination was a matter of initiating a multi-staged process. First, the issue needed to be brought to the attention of the public. This involved an educational campaign of alerting the general populace to the issues faced by women living on collective lands. Second, the movement favorably shaped public opinion through organizing conferences, inviting national and international media to report on the
experiences of women, and arranging field visits for journalists. Third, it was necessary for the movement to take the issue up with decision-makers and leaders. It did so by making complaints to administrative courts in order to ask for compensation for women, calling for protests in the capital city of Rabat and other regions, and maintaining an ongoing dialogue with competent authorities at both the central and local levels.

ADOPTED APPROACHES: LEARNING AND SOLIDARITY

In response to requests from women who were mostly illiterate and poor, the challenge for the ADFM was to help the soulalyats clearly formulate their requests and build a united movement. The ADFM used its expertise in advocacy and its knowledge of Moroccan institutions to support the soulalyats so that they themselves could mobilize and achieve their goals. The success of this approach is evident in testimonies:

“These acquired abilities have made us credible. The men of the tribe and the local authority, who made fun of our demands, take us seriously now because they know we can win. They see us on television, in the newspapers, and that counts.”

—Mennana, Kenitra Region

“Without collective action and knowledge, acquired thanks to the Association, none of us could have obtained our rights. When we had to meet the local authorities, we were prepared: what to say and the questions to ask. It was the only way for them to listen and respect us.”

—Hajiba, Kenitra Region

The material and non-material achievements of this campaign—underway since 2007—can be attributed to the perseverance and solidarity of the soulalyats as well as the political support and close supervision of the ADFM.

In terms of material achievements, the Moroccan Ministry of the Interior issued two circulars in 2009—the first pertaining to the Gharb region and the second to the country as a whole—which enshrined the right of the soulalyats to benefit from the income generated by the transfer of the land. After the adoption of the 2011 Constitution, a third circular issued in 2012 incorporated their right to land ownership, including land that has not been transferred.

Even though they lacked the force of law, these circulars still allowed many women to obtain their rights, thus helping to further mobilize new groups of women. However, given the administrative nature of the circulars and the extent of the resistance from men and tribal leaders, their effective implementation was not always guaranteed.

After years of struggle, Law 62–17 was passed in August 2019 concerning ethnic communities and the management of their property. The law stipulated that members of ethnic communities, both men and women, can obtain usufruct of all community properties to which they belong (article 6) and that both genders have access to the representative bodies of their communities (article 9).

While the struggle of the soulalyats is primarily economic, it is also a story of collective empowerment that has fostered the emergence of a feminist conscience and engendered feelings of confidence and pride. As two women explained,

“When my right to land was recognized, I started to be treated with respect by my community and this encouraged other women to claim their rights. In fact, I realized that my problem is just a small part of a larger one.”

—Laaziza, Ain Cheggag—Middle Atlas

“When the first circular of the Ministry of the Interior was published, I had not yet gained my rights, but my joy and my pride were limitless because I knew that I had contributed in one way or another. Knocking on the Association’s door was the most important step. I understood the roots of my problem.”

—Mennana, Kenitra Region

While the struggle of the soulalyats is primarily economic, it is also a story of collective empowerment that has fostered the emergence of a feminist conscience and engendered feelings of confidence and pride.
In turn, this new confidence generated determination. Perhaps the most important gain has been the ability to overcome fear and to realize the importance of solidarity among women.

“This piece of land that I have plowed has given me priceless value before my family, the tribe and local authorities and gave courage to the other women of the tribe to fearlessly address the authorities. I achieved a lot thanks to our movement. I helped limit the power of tribal representatives who can no longer sign or speak for women. I finally taught the local authority to respect women.”

—Fatima, Meknes Region

This movement has also generated new female leadership. Currently, nearly 30 women sit in the representative bodies of their communities (naibates), which were previously exclusive to men. Their numbers will increase in line with the promulgation of the new law on the management of collective lands.

“As the first soulalyat to run for Naib, I faced enormous difficulties. But the hardest part was the requirement to produce 12 male tribe witnesses to support my candidacy. Again, I had to fight for gender equality in the witness group and I won the battle. It was a matter of principle because I could not accept this systematic rejection of women.”

—Rkia, Haddaa–Gharb

CONCLUSION

The empowerment of predominantly poor women and their proven abilities to resist, mobilize, and organize, have challenged existing power relations within the family, the community, and the patriarchal contract of the Qiwâma. This model of empowering the most economically and socially vulnerable women in society to demand inheritance equality and access to private land can be utilized in other legislative fields that are characterized by direct discrimination against women and where resistance is needed at both the political and social levels.

ENDNOTES

1. In 1951, the law authorized the transfer of collective land located near cities to the state, public institutions, and local communities. Between 1970 and 1980, the transfer of these lands for the implementation of economic and social projects and the access of those entitled to compensation were regulated. In 1969, the Agricultural Investment Code transformed collective land from irrigated perimeters into undivided privately-owned lands (melk).

2. Land ownership in Morocco is governed by customs and traditions, including Sharia and the jurisprudence of Islamic law, and by modern legal systems.

3. This testimony and those that follow are taken from a series of interviews conducted by the ADFM (Association démocratique des femmes du Maroc) with ten soulalyats in 2018 and translated from Arabic by the author.

4. The Caïd is the representative of the Ministry of the Interior at the local level.

5. According to Sharia law, women have the right to inheritance even if, placed in the same degree of kinship with respect to the deceased, their share is lower than that of men.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article was originally written in French. Thank you to the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis for translation assistance.

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Morocco has undertaken a series of reforms targeting the status of women. Yet the country’s Global Gender Gap Index score remains extremely low, at 143 out of 153 nations, and far behind other countries in the Maghreb region. The country has continued to fall in the rankings since 2006, despite measures to combat gender discrimination, such as the adoption of the Gender-Sensitive Budget in 2002, the adoption of the quota system in politics and other sectors, the family code reform, and the institutionalization of gender parity in the country’s 2011 constitutional reforms. The feminization of key sectors such as education, health, and justice have clearly failed to reduce the gender gap and address the lack of women employed in those sectors.

WOMEN IN ACADEMIA IN MOROCCO

The gender gap in academia is particularly important. Moroccan universities have greatly helped to orchestrate fundamental changes in society. Academics train, shape, and form the elite of the country across sectors. The presence of women in higher education is, therefore, likely to change social norms. The feminist movement, for example, owes much to female academics pushing to transform institutions through research, teaching, and board representation. Yet research shows that Moroccan universities severely lack female representation at all levels.

It was not until 2002 that a woman was appointed president of a university in Morocco: Rahma Bourqia became the first, at Université Hassan II in Mohammedia. Presently, only two universities in Morocco are governed by women out of more than 20: Université Hassan Premier Settat is headed by Khadija Essafi and Université Hassan II Casablanca is headed by Aawatef Hayar. Such positions are perceived as political, so excellence and distinction are not the only criteria for selecting a president. Very often, women lack leverageable support from political parties. Additionally, no quota system exists within the selection process, as is the case with decision-making positions in other sectors. These aspects weaken women’s applications. Research conducted at Université Mohammed Premier in Oujda depicts particularly high levels of marginalization for women, reflected not only in their low representation (20% of the entire faculty), but also in their absence from governing bodies at the university. Only three women (0.35%) hold positions in the medical school and on university boards, demonstrating the barriers that female faculty face in obtaining leadership positions.

Discrimination against women in academia is not limited to appointments in key positions; it is present from recruitment until the end of their career. Official statistics from the Ministry of Higher Education’s annual report show that women are often excluded from pursuing this career:
even though girls succeed throughout high school, female enrollment numbers drop significantly as gendered career patterns start to emerge. The issue continues in the transition from undergraduate to graduate school: women compose almost half of all enrolled students in undergraduate education across disciplines, but these figures drop significantly at the graduate level and especially at the doctoral level, as shown in Table 1. No comprehensive study has been conducted to understand the reasons why female graduates are discouraged from pursuing doctoral studies. The fact that this is not addressed as a serious policy problem shows that the issue of gender inequity in academia is far from being resolved.

Patterns of exclusion continue post-graduation: fewer female candidates receive permanent jobs in academia, as shown in Table 2. In general, women in higher education are not well represented. The low proportion of entry-level assistant professor positions highlights the unequal consideration that female applicants receive from hiring committees.

Further, the promotion path statistics reflect the pattern of discrimination and barriers to advancement that women face as university professors. For instance, in 2018–19, women at the associate rank (habilité) number 62 in the 35 to 39 age range, compared to 242 men. This outcome is disheartening, as this age range is considered the most productive and competitive period for academics. In the absence of a clear study, one could speculate that a pattern of self-censorship exists, as women are made to feel less qualified than men and do not apply for promotions. One could also interpret the lack of female participation in research as the result of a preference for a secure job where the pressure to publish is not so high. Many female academics may also be unable or unwilling to set aside family priorities for the sake of job advancement. As a result, by the time women reach their mid-50s, they are largely disadvantaged in terms of promotion. Thus, we can see clearly the contours of the glass ceiling, as women constitute barely 21.36% of faculty nationwide. The limitation of the ministry’s annual report is that it never publishes statistics on women in high ranking academic positions, which would inevitably show the meager number of women represented in such positions.

**TABLE 1 — NUMBER OF GRADUATES BY FIELD AND BY CYCLE (2017–2018)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disciplines</th>
<th>Undergraduate</th>
<th></th>
<th>Master</th>
<th></th>
<th>Ph.D.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy, law &amp; social sciences</td>
<td>17,911</td>
<td>18,153</td>
<td>2,961</td>
<td>2,316</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>13,339</td>
<td>14,166</td>
<td>1,332</td>
<td>806</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>6,569</td>
<td>6,161</td>
<td>1,684</td>
<td>1,530</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science &amp; technology</td>
<td>1,860</td>
<td>2,216</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical School</td>
<td>559</td>
<td>1,083</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental school</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering school</td>
<td>1,639</td>
<td>1,355</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business school</td>
<td>908</td>
<td>1,488</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Ministère de l’Enseignement Supérieur (Ministry of Higher Education), L’enseignement supérieur en chiffre, 2019*
THE COST OF WOMEN’S ABSENCE IN DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS IN MOROCCAN ACADEMIA

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO ADVANCEMENT

The assumption that the changing laws and the presence of women down the pipeline in academia will inevitably yield access to decision-making positions is simply false. Women are still stuck in lower positions, even 60 years after independence and decades after major reforms. Many women have become unmotivated and show no interest in seeking decision-making positions. Research also shows that women are victims of internalized stereotypes and thus are more likely to face barriers when entering male-dominated jobs for the first time.

Indeed, bureaucracy becomes a tool to stifle the determination and persistence of female faculty who hold or wish to hold influence. Examples include administrative authorities closing female faculty-led programs, especially gender studies programs, or refusing to allocate funds and resources for such programs. Even students of these programs are affected by these actions, through delays in receiving diplomas and scholarship rescindment. As a result, only four gender studies master’s programs in Morocco are still functioning, out of eight originally, and out of 13 gender research units, five have been closed.

Additionally, the meager state support for research means female academics often have to fund their own research. This adds a significant financial constraint that exacerbates the ability to balance the teaching load with research and family. As research structures are male-dominated, female faculty rarely lead a research team; they are often unable to gather the number of members required for accreditation, so they are forced to join existing teams where their input goes unnoticed. Female faculty are also rarely called on to lead thesis defense juries or appointment commissions and are not elected as members of their institutions’

TABLE 2 — STATISTICS OF PUBLIC TEACHING STAFF NATIONWIDE (SEGREGATED BY AGE, SEX, SENIORITY)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Professeur (PES)</th>
<th>Professeur Habilité</th>
<th>Professeur agrégé</th>
<th>Professeur Assistant</th>
<th>Maître Assistant</th>
<th>Assistant</th>
<th>Other*</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

SOURCE: Ministère de l’Enseignement Supérieur (Ministry of Higher Education), L’enseignement supérieur en chiffres, 2018–2019
NOTE*: Other = Non-research teachers (Engineers, high-school teachers, primary school teachers, administrators, etc.)
scientific committees. The weak and patriarchal infrastructure at universities also means most faculty offices are shared by at least three or more colleagues, the majority of whom are male. Consequently, female faculty members are often confined in a tight space with male colleagues, which forces them to desert their offices out of discomfort.

Female faculty avoid confrontation with the administration due to these practices and resign themselves to focusing on teaching classes, thereby reinforcing the perception that they are unqualified to assume responsibilities beyond teaching. In a university–wide survey among female faculty in 2013, 52.2% of female faculty prioritized their homes and family over their career, 13% refused to answer the question, 34.8% prioritized their career, and 47.8% experienced work–related depression. The survey also revealed a feeling of loneliness among female faculty who face intimidation and lack of support.

Further, the attacks on ambitious female faculty result not in expressions of solidarity among female colleagues, but in animosity or even jealousy towards the victims. In the absence of a culture that recognizes female excellence, women in academia become victims of their own ambition; they are seen as enemies and isolated from other colleagues.

As a result of these systemic issues, female faculty limit their presence on campus to the classes they teach and their voices are not heard when developing institutional policies.

**CONCLUSION**

The absence of women from decision–making positions in universities will have a negative impact on future generations, as they will internalize the extant patriarchal system. This issue will have a widespread impact on Morocco’s development, as studies have shown that human capital wealth is greatly reduced by gender inequality.

Aware of the psychological constraints and the numerous injustices female faculty face in Morocco, a group of academics created the Association of Women University Professors in 2016 at Université Mohammed Premier in Oujda. The association’s objective is to promote the contribution that female faculty make to academia and to call for greater representation of women in university decision–making positions. The creation of the association is the first of many necessary steps toward resolving the issue of gender inequality in academia, but there are other important steps that could be taken at the governmental level to help further this agenda. These include:

- Align strategies toward gender equality at all levels of higher education management.
- Introduce a mandatory quota system in university governing bodies.
- Form the university’s general budget with a gender–sensitive lens.
- Create safe campuses for women.
- Create a national coalition of women in academia in Morocco.

**ENDNOTES**


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Cite as: Boutkhil, Soumia. 2020. The Cost of Women’s Absence in Decision-making Positions in Moroccan Academia. Issue brief no. 06.23.20. Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.
Tunisia has long been recognized for its progressive attitude toward women, with feminist organizations emerging as early as 1936. Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun suggests that, “[Tunisia] is the most progressive country in the Arab world.” Caroline Perrot asserts that “[Tunisia] is seen as a forerunner for women’s rights in the Arab world.” Valentine Moghadam shares the same view, stating, “Legal reforms made Tunisia the most liberal country in the Arab world.” Women have been able to successfully lobby the government to ratify the Commission on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and have demanded action against all forms of discrimination and violence. Women continued to elevate their status after the 2011 uprising using grassroots mobilization efforts, leading to support from politicians. Previously, decisions about women’s status were made at the government level and women were not consulted. This was the case with the Code of Personal Status (CSP)—a series of progressive laws that aimed to promote gender equality—adopted in 1957. The CPS was said to be a gift on a silver tray to women because, as President Habib Bourguiba argued, it was created without any demands from women.

The shift toward women’s autonomy and the power to enact change was quite an achievement, as the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) experienced difficulties denouncing matrimonial violence and marital rape under the repressive regime of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011). Now, a growing area of concern is the status of women in state institutions, including courts, police stations, and gendarmeries. Nine years after the 2011 uprisings, Tunisian women have not lost any of their rights, but the move for equality is far from over and the need to change societal norms remains a core issue. Discrimination has persisted in Tunisia and it seems the freedoms granted to women were mostly implemented in order to improve the country’s reputation in the West. This brief aims to further an understanding of the substantive changes, if any, that women in Tunisia have experienced.

### RECENT ACHIEVEMENTS AND SETBACKS IN WOMEN’S EQUALITY

#### Education

The government’s will to decrease gender inequality has allowed women’s access to education in Tunisia to continue to expand. Tunisia’s prioritization of female education is admirable and bound for success. Tunisia’s future looks much more liberal and altruistic than many of its regional counterparts, though only time will tell if this leads to genuine change for the country.

Nearly 100% of the country’s girls are educated — a higher percentage than boys. According to UNESCO figures, the education rate between young men and women in Tunisia is almost equal; in 2007, 96.7% of girls and 95.5% of boys were enrolled in primary education. Sexual health education has also increased after a backlash regarding a teacher who raped over 20 children in a small city in southern Tunisia.

Nine years after the 2011 uprisings, Tunisian women have not lost any of their rights, but the move for equality is far from over and the need to change societal norms remains a core issue.
Despite its modern approach to many issues, Tunisia has not been able to bring about needed changes, partly as a result of the number of extreme Islamists and Shari’a proponents who are increasingly found in parliament.

In 2018, Yamina Zoghlimi, a conservative member of parliament and of the Islamic Ennahdha party, unexpectedly supported this move, saying, “There are young Tunisians who consider the body to be haram [forbidden in Islam]. The ministry of education is very outdated on this subject; young people must be taught scientific sex education so that they can protect themselves and others.”

Women would not have been able to move forward in their struggle for equality without an education, though many in poor and rural areas still face major barriers, such as a lack of public transport or a shortage of water. In these rural regions, primary and secondary school children may still have to walk kilometers to school, facing many risks. In 2019, a young girl named Maya had to walk through a flooded river to get home from school. She died, resulting in substantial media attention. Maya was the daughter of a poor couple who lived in utter poverty. They viewed her education as a path to stable employment and to helping her parents lead more comfortable lives.

While this incident led to demands that the government spend more on educational institutions and hospitals, rather than mosques, such requests inevitably provoke the ire of Islamists who consider them to be blasphemy.

Government

Tunisia owes much of its success in the area of women’s rights to former President Habib Bourguiba, “who introduced the concept of modernity with a secular spirit and respecting female rights” and dared to speak about equal rights to inheritance. Women’s demands also led the late President Beji Caid Essebsi—a follower of Bourguiba who was very supportive of women’s equality—to appoint a commission dedicated to women’s rights. Kemal Daoud, an Algerian writer, wrote of Essebsi, “The president of Tunisia has become the leading figure of reformism in the Arab world by advocating equal inheritance rights for Muslim women and their right to marry non-Muslim foreigners.”

Following Essebsi’s death in July 2019, conservative politicians were elected to the position of president (Kais Said) and head of parliament (Rached Ghannouchi, the head of Ennahdha). President Said was elected with 72.8% of the vote, despite his lack of political experience. He promised to “make the most of his popularity to bring about substantial changes.” After several months of debate, a new cabinet was finally proposed in February 2020, which—unfortunately—contains too few women.

Despite its modern approach to many issues, Tunisia has not been able to bring about needed changes, partly as a result of the number of extreme Islamists and Shari’a proponents who are increasingly found in parliament. There are a total of 74 Islamists in Tunisia’s parliament out of 217 members, one third of whom are women. In March 2020, Mohamed Affes, the deputy from the Al-Karama coalition, proudly and vociferously defended takfir-ism—or accusing non-believers of being infidels—when he proposed that security agents should cut off the hands of thieves, as is done in more religiously conservative states such as Saudi Arabia. Such pronouncements indicate that extreme Islamist government officials would like to see a move away from a secular state and a return to Shari’a law.

Additionally, there are several restrictive laws impeding progress on women’s rights. Bochra BelHmida, a lawyer, former president of ATFD, a former member of parliament, and chair of the special commission created by former President Essebsi for the defense of individual rights (COLIBE), has noted several violations of human rights in existing laws. For example, a couple caught kissing in a car in the northern suburb of Tunis resulted in the man—who was a foreigner—being jailed for days. There was also the case of a woman who was refused service at a courthouse because a female public servant said she was dressed indecently. These are just some of the tactics currently used by Islamists to change the fabric of life in Tunisia.
Activism Against Sexual Harassment

Tunisian feminists have followed the global “#MeToo” movement. Headed by Aswat Nissa (Women’s Voices) and other feminist NGOs, “Me Too” became “EnaZeda” in Tunisia. The aim was to encourage female and male victims of sexual violence to break their silence. Aswat Nissa now comprises 32,648 members who share their stories and experiences on a daily basis via organized meetings, seminars, press conferences, and radio interviews.

In 2019, a Tunisian schoolgirl accused one of her teachers of sexual harassment, which he denied. The parents removed their daughter from that school, but when no action was taken against the teacher, the father sued and the teacher was jailed. In mid-January 2020, the teacher’s colleagues went on strike on his behalf with the support of the Tunisian Workers’ Union (UGTT). However, there has also been solid support of the school girl. On January 29, 2020, Aswat Nissa organized a press conference on her behalf, with witnesses who are currently receiving death threats for speaking up.

At present, the plaintiff has not been able to prove the sexual harassment and the investigation conducted by the school administration was not able to find any evidence in support of the accusation.

In October 2019, a young student reported a parliamentary candidate for allegedly masturbating in front of her school. A video of the shameful event was published on Facebook and widely shared. He attempted to hide behind his parliamentary status, which granted him immunity, but on December 14, 2019, a mass demonstration was organized against this exhibitionist in front of the government headquarters. He was subsequently jailed but after a trial failed to find him guilty he was released on February 13, 2020. The demonstration against him was organized by a new feminist group, “Falgatna” (“We’re Fed Up”), which prides itself on being “an independent, feminist, citizenry movement that aims to resist patriarchy, discrimination, and violence against women assigned at birth or those identifying as women.”

Aswat Nissa took part in this defensive feminist wave against sexual harassment. They organized an event and created a corresponding app called the 2019 Electric Dunes, which they used to denounce sexual harassment through various slogans and methods of storytelling. Slogans they used included: “Don’t tell me how to dress, tell them not to rape,” and “Have your whistle on you in order to denounce.” A former Ennahdha minister and member of parliament also spoke out as part of this movement by reporting her own sexual harassment at age 12.

Other recent mobilizations include a sit-in organized by the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) on January 23, 2020, at the Tunis Tribunal. It was organized in support of Rachida Kouki, who experienced workplace violence. On January 28, 2020, human rights activist Lina Ben Mhenni was carried to the El Jellaz cemetery and buried by women instead of men, even though this is against a strict tradition in Muslim communities.

**IMAGE 1 — LINA BEN MHENNI’S FUNERAL**

*SOURCE* Karim Benabdallah, via the International Observatory of Human Rights
This upending of tradition bred anger, of course, among many Tunisian conservatives. Yet it was not the first time that Tunisian women have broken this taboo. For example, in January 2017, my daughter and I followed the coffins of my son and his wife to the cemetery; they were among the 39 people killed in a terrorist attack in Istanbul on January 1, 2017. We took this action despite opposition and shock from our relatives. In the past, this would have never occurred, but attitudes are changing.

NOTE
Khedija Arfaoui (left) and daughter Mouna Azzabi at the funeral of Mohamed Ali (Arfaoui’s son) and Senda Azzabi (his wife) in Tunis. Ali and Azzabi were killed during a terrorist attack in Istanbul in January 2017. Traditionally coffins in Tunisia are carried solely by men, but Arfaoui and a large group of women joined the procession.

SOURCE Sofienne Hamdaoui, Agence France-Presse

CONCLUSION: A LONG ROAD AHEAD

Although women have made numerous gains in Tunisia, they have yet to attain full, equal rights. Former President Ben Ali’s repressive laws were much feared and they still remain an obstacle for anyone who dares to express criticism. Labor laws and the Penal Code need to be homologated in line with the 2014 Constitution. Tunisian women have not lost any of their rights, but unfortunately, the move toward equality was somewhat halted after the death of former President Beji Caid Essebsi. He was a strong supporter of women’s rights, encouraging the creation of the COLIBE committee to report on legislative reforms concerning individual freedoms and equality. In order to truly gain parity in the political sphere and promote female leadership, the glass ceiling must be broken. Indeed, although both horizontal and vertical parity have been integrated into electoral legislation on municipalities, gender equality has not yet been reached.

While the Parity Law adopted in 2011 mandated that candidate lists must include alternating male and female candidates in any election, women remained under-represented. Hela Gharbi, president of the National Union of Public Works Councillors, declared that men cannot understand women’s intrinsic problems; they believe that women’s political activism can only be of secondary significance. She added that men alone speak in public, “as if one was conveying the message that women cannot be leaders.” More broadly, Tunisia ranks toward the bottom of the Global Gender Gap Report, 124th out of 153 countries. As Amna Guellali, director of Human Rights Watch in Tunisia, has argued, women’s rights will remain threatened as long as repressive laws do not allow for “key safeguards against abuse.”
ENDNOTES


5. Valentine M. Moghadam, Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East (Lynne Reiner Publishers: 2013), 44.

6. Both Tunisia and Egypt ratified the CEDAW in 1985, with some reservations.

7. Mervat F. Hatem, “In the Shadow of the State: Changing Definitions of Arab Women’s Developmental Citizenship Rights,” Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies 1, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 42.


9. ATFD, or the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, was accepted as an autonomous women’s organization in 1989, two years after Ben Ali came to power, and at the same time as AFUTRD (Association of Tunisian Women for Research on Development). They were to be the only autonomous women’s rights organizations until 2011. They worked despite close scrutiny from Ben Ali’s police, without any help from the media. They formed working groups and alliances with women activists elsewhere in the world, in particular in Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, and more recently Libya. They sought to “to reinterpret the Islamic texts from a gender sensitive perspective” (Hatem, 47). Their objective since the beginning has been to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW). They have not reached this goal, as the battle for equal inheritance continues.


21. A Tunisian newspaper reported that the girl had been upset at her teacher who had refused her proposals, and that she had likely invented the story. See Le Temps, January 19, 2020, Société plus. Du côté du prétoire, page 5.

22. Unfortunately, nothing came out of this, and he remained in parliament. An explanation provided in activist circles on Facebook was that being diabetic, he had “disturbances” while he was in his car, with a violent need to urinate. So he used a bottle to urinate and the girl took a photo while he was urinating into the bottle.


REFERENCES


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**AUTHOR**


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Cite as: **Arfaoui, Khedija. 2020. Women in Action in Tunisia. Issue brief no. 06.24.20. Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.**
Turkey’s gender equality record is marked with contradictions and controversies. The country was the first in the Middle East to recognize equal rights for women in public and private life. As early as the 1930s, the state encouraged women to obtain an education, pursue diverse professions, run for parliament, and participate in public life beyond spousal duties. However, the country still scores low in global gender disparity rankings. The state is heavily involved in the gender equality narrative, conservative groups have a strong voice in the implementation of laws, and various women’s movements are divided.

PHASES OF WOMEN’S GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM IN TURKEY

Until the 1980s, state feminism dominated mobilization efforts in Turkey. Scholars argue that the state labeled women as either de-feminized citizens or national mothers. Women’s organizations downplayed this issue and bargained for equal citizenship. In the 1980s, a group of feminists began to question this view and challenged the patriarchy in public and private life. Due to these efforts, private life now represents one of the most important sources of struggle between Turkish secularists, Islamists, liberals, and conservatives.

Between 1990 and 2010, the feminist movement’s endeavors led to significant achievements: Turkey signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), changed the civil code to enhance equality in private life, eliminated references to traditional values in the penal code, and established positive gender discrimination in the constitution. These legal reforms culminated in the signing of the 2011 Istanbul Convention.

Until 2010, the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) government perceived gender equality as an important requirement for EU accession and was prepared to take necessary steps. However, in light of the diminishing interest in EU membership over the last decade, the government now dismisses gender equality. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated in a meeting with women’s organizations in 2010 that he does not believe in gender equality. He has further remarked, “Women are obviously different from men. You cannot bring women and men to the same position because it contradicts the creation (fitrat). What is correct is the equality of men to men and equality of women to women.”

While some women’s organizations agreed with this sentiment, others vehemently disagreed, leading to a highly divided front.

SPECIFIC ISSUES SURROUNDING WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS

Three specific issues constitute the main agenda for Turkey’s women’s movement in recent years: domestic violence, alimony, and child marriage. Different women’s groups have positioned themselves as for or against these issues. This controversy stems from a classic debate on whether women should be glorified as mothers or considered equals in...
society. The distinction is reflected in many debates, including in the Istanbul Convention. The debate is not only discussed by women; the conservative and male-dominated media, the president’s office, the AKP Parliamentary group, the Ministries of Justice and Family, and the president’s wife also participate in this discussion, often taking contradictory positions. The conservative circles criticize the Istanbul Convention for promoting gender equality, rather than the recognition of biological and sexual differences (fitrat).

Domestic Violence
Violence against women is a major issue in Turkey; in 2019 alone, 474 women were killed, mostly by their husbands. Moreover, 40% of women claim they have personally experienced intrafamily violence. The government claims it is sensitive to the issue and will take legal action against perpetrators. Unlike some radical Islamist theologists, the government does not agree that husbands have the right to commit domestic violence; it is seen as a crime and a basis for divorce in Turkey. In fact, even though the victim’s protection may be difficult to ensure, intrafamily violence may lead to an emergency barring of the perpetrator from the home by the court.

Nonetheless, the Istanbul Convention and national law forbid any mediation after the initial emergency barring. Male AKP members of parliament disagree with emergency barring, claiming that three million men have been forced from their homes. The female AKP members suggest such court orders only total 69,500. Conservative groups do not agree at all with state intervention and would rather family elders and local leaders deal with the problem.

Another controversy surrounding the Istanbul Convention concerns the concept of gender. Conservatives criticize the convention’s view of gender, as it is based on a social view of femininity and masculinity rather than biological features, which they argue challenges the traditional sexual division of labor and the familial authority structure. The conservatives further criticize the inclusion of LGBT people in the concept of gender, as it is seen as a deviation from God-created order.

The lobby against the Istanbul Convention mainly consists of men, but has also revealed divisions among women’s organizations. All of the women’s organizations recognize the rights acquired by the Istanbul Convention, but some are not proactive in its promotion.

On November 25, 2019—the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women—the president and his wife announced their determination to eradicate intrafamily violence and their recognition that violence against women is a violation of human rights. Simultaneously, however, police used pepper gas to intervene in feminist protests in Istanbul. The state therefore did not actively implement the president’s public determination. Only Emine Erdoğan (the president’s wife), KADEM (a pro-government gender-based NGO organized by Sümeyye Erdoğan Bayraktar, the president’s daughter), and the state’s gender mechanisms were given visibility on that day. The same day, the Minister in Charge of Family launched a campaign strengthening women’s roles as mothers, saying, “prosperous and powerful nations are the ones where happy individuals live under congenial families.” In opposition to this, secular feminists claimed that the patriarchal society’s view of the family unit is only one of the reasons for domestic violence; the state’s unwillingness to take precautions—such as through educational programs, safe houses, or treatment for perpetrators—and its unwillingness to implement existing law also contribute to the issue.

Alimony
A change to alimony and property laws in 2002 also produced controversy. The conservatives oppose the equal division of property as alimony, claiming it facilitates divorce and encourages women not to remarry. Male AKP parliament members agreed that proposed alimony amounts were too high and long-lasting. Female AKP members of parliament retorted that the average monthly income from alimony is around one-tenth of the minimum wage. KADEM is actually more proactive on the alimony issue than on intrafamily violence. It published a report in 2019 recognizing...
the right to alimony, but it compromises by proposing mediation and reemphasizing that continuing alimony is not obligatory but instead depends on the decisions of courts.\textsuperscript{12}

Child Marriage

A similarly controversial issue is that of child marriage. Presently, Turkish civil law allows marriage at 18, with the option to marry at 16 under exceptional circumstances. Perpetrators who marry outside of these age minimums are charged with child abuse. The conservatives claim that this ruling came too late and is against Islamic jurisprudence.

KADEM officially argued against child marriage in 2014.\textsuperscript{13} Since then, the government stance has not changed, and KADEM has been notoriously silent, as the organization refuses to take sides. AKP’s women’s organizations are also silent over child marriage. Many conservatives argue that the child marriage law leads to the breakup of families.

Conversely, secular women’s groups take a strong stance against lowering the marriage age and decriminalizing perpetrators; they argue that such laws, if enacted, would not only violate gender equality by restricting women to the role of motherhood but will also lead to abuses of a child’s rights.

CONCLUSION: TURKEY IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

This brief highlights some of challenges that women’s rights organizations face in Turkey, including conservative governance and a highly involved state as well as a fractured gender movement. While Turkey is unique in some regards, its struggle for gender equality also follows global patterns. Since the 1995 Beijing conference on equality for women, there have been significant advances in gender rights around the world. Many governments have taken steps forward by establishing mechanisms such as legislative quotas and affirmative action. Feminist movements reaffirmed that gender equality not only means equality under the law, but also within social structures, culture, politics, and the economy. International organizations drafted charters, conventions, and funded significant projects for policy formation and implementation. However, a backlash followed the Beijing conference and grew more prevalent with the rise of right-wing populist movements.\textsuperscript{14} In the mid–2000s, the Catholic Church drew attention to same-sex marriages, critiquing their “gender ideology,” “gender theory,” and “(anti–) genderism.”\textsuperscript{15}

The pushback against gender equality is therefore neither specific to Turkey, nor to MENA countries. It runs parallel to and is inspired by the anti–gender movements that have developed globally. However, an additional dimension exists in the MENA region, not only because of the existence of Islamic fundamentalists, but also due to the authoritarian populist nature of these countries’ governments.

ENDNOTES

5. The landmarks of this period differ, but a general consensus exists that AKP’s attitude toward the EU and liberalism consists of two adverse periods.


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Cite as: Ayata, Ayşe. 2020. State and Women’s Grassroots Activism in Turkey. Issue brief no. 06.25.20. Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.

center for the
MIDDLE EAST
Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy
This brief draws on my personal experience leading two programs—Women’s Economic Empowerment and Women’s Political Empowerment—both of which have worked to address the state of Lebanese women’s social and economic issues since the 1990s.

Prior to my direct involvement in advancing women’s political and economic empowerment, I was engaged in daily meetings with the constituents represented by my husband’s family. It is customary in Lebanon for constituents to seek help from hereditary political families who have held prominent positions in Lebanon for centuries. Constituents would arrive at any time of the day and without prior notice with the expectation that our family—the Arslans—would help address their grievances. My role was to help manage individual complaints and to intercede to seek justice. Unfortunately, there is not always equality before the law in Lebanon. Through this work it became clear to me that legal reform must also be accompanied by public awareness, political empowerment from below, and economic empowerment. I brought this knowledge with me to the realm of women’s rights.

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

In 2001, I—as part of a group of both men and women—helped to initiate the Women’s Political Empowerment program. Its goal was to enlist educated women to help bridge the gap of women’s participation in the national decision-making process. At that time, women—even if they were educated and held prominent positions in companies or civil society organizations—hesitated to get directly involved in politics, as it was considered a man’s domain. To break through this patriarchal domination, we organized awareness campaigns—beginning in Beirut and spreading to other areas across the country—that targeted both academic institutions and the general public. We organized conferences, seminars, roundtables, and visits to government officials and political leaders. With the support of enlightened men who also believed that women should play a stronger role in economic and political life, we arranged demonstrations, sit-ins, and protests whenever and wherever needed. One of our central demands was that women should be elected to parliament in numbers that comply with the recommended 30% prescribed at the 1995 Beijing Conference.1

Second, to achieve legal reform, I collaborated with lawyers who supported women’s rights and other intellectuals. We launched campaigns advocating for gender equality before the law as well as within political parties, where women elected to office were still not given prominent positions.

Third, to achieve public awareness, I collaborated with media outlets and local NGOs to launch awareness campaigns targeting women in both urban and rural areas across the country. The collaborators pinpointed issues and listed them in order of priority; many of these reflected the complaints I had encountered in my daily life.

With the support of enlightened men who also believed that women should play a stronger role in economic and political life, we arranged demonstrations, sit-ins, and protests whenever and wherever needed.
Fourth, to enact empowerment from below, we focused on education, believing it is the cornerstone of development and progress. For example, we established the New Generation School—comprising approximately 300 students in primary and intermediary levels—in a rural area to accommodate students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who were able to attend free of charge, and allowed for mixed gender classrooms, which was a progressive step in a reserved society. Eventually, we further developed the initiative to promote the involvement of rural women in local governance across the country, focusing on municipal and mayoral elections. Rural women were encouraged to ask questions about candidates that evaluated their personalities, capabilities, and readiness for public service. Such a role in local politics was previously considered solely a man’s domain. By seeking accountability and demonstrating a high level of awareness and civic responsibility, rural women were encouraged to become equal partners in the formation of public opinion. As a next step, we encouraged the women to get involved in national movements, such as popular protests, sit-ins, and demonstrations, to demand gender equality and equal participation. In their daily lives, these women are likely to face, evaluate, and accordingly accept or reject issues related to maintaining peace following the Lebanese civil war, security, and well-being, and they should be active decision-makers in all issues that directly impact their family’s well-being.

The results of the 2018 elections indicated promising developments. First, women more actively participated in both national and local politics, with an unprecedented 111 female candidates running for office, compared to just 12 female candidates in 2009. We also observed a progressive change in attitude toward women’s participation in elections. Further, women’s participation had a dramatic effect on electoral outcomes at large. For the first time in Lebanon, and particularly in rural areas, a remarkable number of independent candidates were elected, moving districts away from the inherited tradition of supporting leaders based on confessional or personal/family ties.

Even with these successes, it was clear early on in this work that women’s political empowerment must also be accompanied by economic empowerment.

**ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

In 1990, I—along with a group of men and women from different religious sects and backgrounds—founded an NGO called “Society of Lebanon the Giver.” This NGO aims to equip women with the necessary tools to become economically independent. For this objective, we created a plan:

- To transform rural women into capable earners, thus changing their status from relying to reliable;
- To fight poverty by including women in the workforce and enhancing productivity; and
- To liberate women by securing their economic independence.
To implement the plan, we established a training school for handicraft production, which any woman can join free of charge, thereby enabling her to acquire a profession and helping her to live with dignity. The training classes include tailoring, hand and machine embroidery, drawing on tissue, hairdressing, make-up sessions, and flower arrangement. Classes are scheduled in the mornings to allow women to be at home when their children return from school. Any woman is able to register for any class, which accommodates 12 to 15 trainees. Six classes are repeated three times a year, and each year we have an average of 200 graduates. However, the number of trainees has markedly decreased in recent years, since the new generation is more educated and technologically savvy. Though trainees are often from the neighboring towns and villages, we also accommodate remote, rural areas through special training programs. To do so, we collaborate with NGOs in remote areas that provide physical locations for the training. The trainers are paid by the Ministry of Social Affairs and graduates have full liberty to choose their work according to the skillsets they have acquired. Some graduates also give free training sessions to women in their milieu.

As noted earlier, training options included a workshop for hand and machine embroidery, where women could practice as often as needed to become skilled artisans. With close supervision and guidance, the graduates were able to produce luxurious handicrafts. The Society of Lebanon the Giver organized dozens of exhibitions across Lebanon showcasing and selling these goods, ensuring the training school’s ability to continue its operations.

Despite these successes, we encountered many challenges. We had to take into consideration the nature of the targeted areas and the prominence of conservative traditions, taking precautions not to offend residents. Such a policy helped us smoothly launch the program, which, over time, became an indirect challenge to existing social norms and patriarchal mentalities. To help in this regard, we launched awareness campaigns surrounding women’s rights. We emphasized through these campaigns that human rights apply to all human beings and that any woman is eligible to enjoy economic opportunities. Another campaign was directed at helping to educate women about their ability to contribute to their household, connecting them to each other, and emphasizing the right to take opportunities for productivity irrespective of their educational background or social status. We also launched a campaign about other daily concerns, mainly focusing on health care and environmental issues.

At the training schools themselves, we also encountered issues relating to expectations between the trainer and trainees. The trainers demanded full attention and persistence to protect their reputations, while trainees were eager to earn money, as most could not afford to leave their homes and learn a new skill without a monetary justification for their time away. Complex transportation issues were a further impediment, since public transportation is lacking in Lebanon. Sometimes, we were able to hire a bus to solve this issue. Another impediment was the inefficient method of announcing the training sessions; often we had to rely on word-of-mouth because the society had a limited budget with little access to modern technology.

Despite these challenges, our economic empowerment initiative yielded many positive outcomes, the most important being sustainable development in remote areas. Our efforts help to improve standards of living as well as women’s self-confidence and social status. Their financial earnings lessened the burden on male family members and eased tension in family relations. To this day, although on a smaller scale, the program continues, attracting new trainees and empowering them with skills to promote and develop products according to the markets’ needs.

Personal stories help to illustrate how this process changed lives. One such story is that of Olga, a mother of eight whose family was displaced during the years of the Lebanese civil war and needed shelter. They lived for a decade in one room until we began marketing and selling her artisanal items in our exhibitions. A few
years later, they were able to buy a three-bedroom apartment, which brought them overwhelming joy. Similarly, Janan lived with her widowed mother and after a series of exhibitions and a loan from the society, she constructed a small house on an inherited property. Janan and her mother were happy to live in their own house, independent of a disrespectful brother and sister-in-law. Another woman, Nawal, repaired her decayed teeth and regained the smile she used to hide. Labibe paid her children’s school tuition and was able to hospitalize her sick father. Nathalie announced on a radio station, “I now have the luxury of choosing my future husband on an equal basis, for now I am productive and can earn my living.” These are just several stories of many.

WOMEN’S POLITICAL STATUS

The implementation of the Women’s Political Empowerment program challenged patriarchal forces, which are born in the family, consolidated by social concepts, and sustained by law. To frame our plan of action, we established the Committee for Women’s Political Empowerment. Believing in democracy and equal citizenship and in line with the principles of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), our plan aimed to:

- Fight obstacles and hindrances;
- Negate taboos;
- Overcome impediments; and
- Ensure the longevity of achievements.

Our activities accelerated as we organized many conferences, sit-ins and protests for lobbying, advocating, and demanding a quota of women represented in parliament. We organized awareness campaigns, of which the media was widely supportive. We built the program on the conviction that with less marginalization and more cooperation, men and women together can build a better country on social, economic, and political levels. Those campaigns addressed both men and women; we addressed men to show that women’s political roles neither contradict nor diminish men’s roles, but rather complement them.

We addressed women to be champions of women’s causes and encouraged them to treat their daughters and sons with equality, thus breaking down the psychological barriers women face as a result of traditions. Women also play a vital role on the national scale in reformulating public opinion toward gender balance.

The traditional statement iterated against the political involvement of women in politics was “Why women? Did men perish?” Another, less aggressive statement claimed that “it is not the right time.” The popularity of these two statements gradually diminished. Today, the sociopolitical prominence of women, once an extraordinary phenomenon, is now natural and indispensable. However, Lebanon still falls short of meeting Beijing Conference recommendations that suggest women should be represented at 30% in decision-making positions. Currently, only six of the 128 members of the national parliament are women. Nevertheless, women did reach the 30% threshold in the newly formed cabinet, where six out of 20 ministers appointed were women.

The story of grassroots mobilization presented in this brief shows that it is an indispensable tool for the development and the enhancement of women’s political and economic status, and for women’s ability to achieve a decent quality of life. Importantly, it also shows that women’s political empowerment must be accompanied by economic empowerment. The two goals are naturally associated, irrespective of which comes first. In the experience of our grassroots efforts in Lebanon, the economic empowerment program paved the way for a female sociopolitical partnership, and the women’s political empowerment program cemented it.
ENDNOTES


2. Two key issues included implementing a gender quota in Lebanon’s parliament that complied with the recommendations of the 1995 Beijing Conference and amending national legislation that prohibits Lebanese women from passing their nationality to their children.

3. Full names of the women involved are not used in order to protect their privacy.


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Economic Empowerment Policies for Women in Jordan: A Focus on Amended Laws

Amal M. El-Kharouf, Ph.D., Professor at the Center for Women’s Studies, University of Jordan

Despite Jordan’s recent achievements in development, the country’s gender gap for economic participation is significant: it was ranked 138 out of 153 countries in the World Economic Forum’s 2020 ratings for this sector. The estimated cost associated with the lack of women’s participation in the labor market in 2013 amounted to about 11 billion dinars, or 46% of Jordan’s gross domestic product (GDP).

The lack of representation of women in Jordan’s economy is especially surprising given their high levels of educational attainment. Jordanian women have seen significant educational progress: females had the highest enrollment rates in secondary schools and universities in 2018, an important shift from rates in the 1990s. However, the economic participation rate for women was just 15.4% in 2018, compared to 55.9% for men. This contradiction reflects Jordan’s failure to invest in half of its human capital, thereby impeding development in a country where the workforce—in the absence of natural resources—is one of its most important assets.

REASONS FOR THE LOW PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE LABOR MARKET

Several reasons may account for the low participation of women in Jordan’s labor market, including the lack of social programs supporting women’s employment, the lack of opportunities in the labor market, and the presence of social norms and pressures that dissuade women from seeking employment. Around 25.6% of women and 15.7% of men in Jordan believe that work affects a woman’s ability to care for children, especially in the absence of supportive policies and services such as nurseries and sufficient maternity leave.

Early marriage can complicate this issue and further limit women’s access to the labor market, if they end up raising children at an early age. The percentage of married women under the age of 18 reached 13.4% in 2017.

Lastly, there are simply fewer economic opportunities available for women. In recent years, Jordan has suffered from weak GDP growth that typically has not exceeded 2%, and the unemployment rate reached 19% in 2018. Of the total unemployed population, 28.9% were females, while 16.4% were males. Therefore, even when there is job creation, these opportunities mostly favor males. This issue persists even among highly educated women: the percentage of unemployed men who hold a bachelor’s degree or higher is 25.6%, but the unemployment rate for women who hold a bachelor’s degree or higher is 78%.

AMENDING LAWS RELATED TO WOMEN’S WORK

Between 2000 and 2018, many of the laws related to women’s workforce participation in Jordan were reformed, including the social security law, the labor law, and the civil service system. The sections below outline some of these changes.
Social Security

The new social security law allowed both female and male owners of small businesses consisting of fewer than five employees to gain access to social security benefits. This enhanced the social and economic protection of working women, especially for those working in small establishments such as sewing and secretarial labor. Further, the law stipulated that anyone—including women—who engaged in domestic work in their own households could be insured, whereas before, only wage workers could receive insurance. Due to this law, women can now receive old age, disability, and life insurance benefits, thereby ensuring their social protection and pension salaries. This was a substantial gain for women.

The new law also introduced maternity insurance to protect insured female workers, especially in the private sector. This encourages the employment of women and discourages employers from ending women’s jobs in the event of marriage or pregnancy. A woman who receives a retirement or disability pension can also combine this pension with a pension entrusted to her by her parents. Her share can be disbursed in the event that she is not working, regardless of her age.

The most important advantage granted to women by the new social security law was the right for widows to combine their wages with those they receive from their deceased husband. In the previous social security law of 2001, a widow was only allowed to combine her wages with no more than 50 dinars from her deceased husband. The new law was an important qualitative shift in providing economic and social protection for working women. The new law further stipulated that the salary of a deceased woman should be inherited in full by all beneficiaries, including her husband, just as it would be for a man. The previous law required that the deceased woman be the sole provider of the heirs in order for them to inherit her salary. The new law also stipulated that a woman can inherit her deceased son’s salary, even if she is not married to her son’s father.

Additionally, the new social security law gave immunity to funds due from social security, except for debt from alimony and the social security institution, whose funds are not to exceed a quarter of the total debt. It also allowed women to seize part of their ex-husband’s retirement pension as alimony.

Labor

The Labor Law of 1996 included important changes that affected women. For example, female employees were given the right to maternity leave for 10 weeks with full pay, instead of six weeks with half pay, as was the case before. Pregnant women were also promised job security through the right to leave their positions for one year without pay. Female employees were guaranteed an hour a day to breastfeed their babies during the first year after birth, and employers were banned from dismissing a woman during pregnancy or maternity leave. Each working spouse was also given the right to obtain a one-time leave of up to two years without pay to accompany their spouse to work outside of Jordan. Finally, jobs that place restrictions on women working at night, such as factory work, were clearly identified.

There were further changes made to the labor law in 2008. The law originally excluded agricultural workers, domestic workers, and members of the employer’s family. Such exclusions had a dramatic impact on women, especially those living in rural areas, who make up a high percentage of these excluded groups. The 2008 amendment to the labor law aimed to include these groups, which in turn affected the social security law, as these groups became eligible for social security. An amendment was also developed to imprison or fine an employer if an employee was sexually harassed during work. Previously, the law would close the institution if an employee was sexually harassed at work, but the new amendment acknowledged that it was better to punish the employer, as closing the institution would harm the rest of the employees.

In 2019, the law was amended again. These changes allowed for the children of Jordanian women married to foreigners.
to work without a permit. It also provided for the adoption of a flexible work system, whereby workers could work from home, have flexible hours, and be held accountable based on the quality of their work and their attendance. It enforced rules to prevent wage discrimination based on gender and stiffened the penalties for such discrimination. It provided paternity leave for three days after a worker’s wife gave birth, and lastly, required that nurseries or daycares be available at the workplace for all employees with children. It did not limit childcare services based on the number of male or female employees, whereas the previous law only offered childcare services to female workers.

**Retirement**

The Civil Retirement Act of 2018 permitted a woman to combine her salary with the salary of her husband or her parents. This law also stipulated that a family member of a deceased woman can inherit her salary without conditions. Previously, the law only allowed family members to inherit the deceased woman’s salary if they were incapacitated or unemployed. Mothers can now also benefit from their son’s salary without conditions, whereas previously a mother was required to be widowed or divorced. The new law rescinded a previous rule that required a woman’s retirement salary to be cut off upon marriage, only returned to the woman upon her husband’s death or divorce, and permanently taken away in the event of a second marriage. Finally, the new law extended the retirement conditions for female employees. Originally, male employees were allowed to retire after 25 years of acceptable service, and female employees were required to retire after 15 years. The new law extended this timeline for women, allowing them to retire after 20 years.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Despite these important legal changes, women have not been able to participate in the Jordanian economy at a level that matches their educational achievement. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that achieving gender parity in labor force participation rates would increase developed countries’ GDP by 12% over the next 20 years, and that this trend would be even more pronounced in emerging markets. Therefore, the participation of women in the labor market meets the goals of comprehensive development. However, in Jordan, this change requires strong political will. Jordan should implement more ambitious policies that change standards and transform gender relations in society and work, thus addressing structural inequality. Certain policies have had a significant impact in countries where women suffer from discrimination and restrictions to the labor market. These include:

- Reforming the pension system and strengthening legal care for women.
- Improving job benefits and tax exemptions for workers with lower wages, regardless of gender.
- Increasing access to appropriate childcare.
- Promoting women’s political participation and encouraging women to take positions of leadership.
- Activating government policies related to parental leave, including the availability of flexible and part-time work and the right to equal pay.
- Encouraging female entrepreneurs to start businesses. Research has shown that woman–owned companies have higher growth in annual sales than male–owned companies. These firms generate jobs, as female entrepreneurs tend to employ women at higher rates than their male counterparts.
- Developing the public transportation network to make it safer and more convenient for women to travel to work.
ENDNOTES

12. Ibid.

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NGOs: Between Buzzwords and Social Movements

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The growth of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is a worldwide phenomenon and the Middle East is no exception. Many scholars view the proliferation of NGOs in the Middle East as evidence of a vibrant civil society, conflating their presence not only with the “democratizing” features of civil society, but also with social mobilization itself. Yet, the impact of the many NGOs on different social groups in the region has not been adequately evaluated.

Drawing on research in Palestine, this article explores the consequences of the increase in NGOs and the “NGO-ization” of Palestinian social movements. I suggest that the rights-based agenda of women’s NGOs has negatively impacted the mobilizing potential of grassroots women’s organizations, resulting in projects and policies that are not reflective of the broad demands and needs of Palestinian women.

PALESTINIAN NGOs: A BRIEF HISTORY

Before the 1993 Oslo Accord and the formation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1994, Palestinian society was organized around political parties and grassroots organizations. Palestinian NGOs connected and financially supported these groups under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). While the PLO and its political parties were banned by Israel, their satellite organizations were, to some extent, allowed to operate, since they were seen as providers of services such as clinics, schools, and income-generating projects. Therefore, from the end of the first Intifada in 1987 until the 1993 Oslo Accord, the NGO sector was used as the main channel of foreign aid, resulting in services provided at a grassroots level. These NGO actors acquired even more power than their parent parties. The limited life cycle of NGO projects also fragmented the same social movements that the projects were based on, rather than creating “sustainable networking.” After the 1991 Madrid Conference, which enacted a state-building process, the role of NGOs in the West Bank and Gaza shifted from popular movements and grassroots organizations toward further NGO-ization of areas such as conflict resolution. The dual dynamics of state-building and NGO-ization also led to more fragmentation and the demobilization of social movements, including the Palestinian women’s movement. As a process, NGO-ization therefore shifted power relations, from women in grassroots positions toward a new elite.

THE CREATION OF A NEW PALESTINIAN “CIVIL SOCIETY”

The new NGOs that grew exponentially in the post-Oslo period are distinct from the older forms. Categorized as either charitable societies or popular organizations (uttur jamaheryya), these older forms had entirely different structures, discourses, leaders, projects, and networks. Accessible to all, they aimed to mobilize students, workers, women, and youth. The newer NGOs are

The dual dynamics of state-building and NGO-ization also led to more fragmentation and the demobilization of social movements, including the Palestinian women’s movement.
smaller entities, dependent on foreign funding, active only in cities, and run by an urban middle-class elite.

The decline of popular grassroots organizations began in 1993, due to the decline of institutional politics, meaning politics practiced through institutions such as unions and political parties. During the state-building process, the gender agenda became a pawn between those searching for a new basis of legitimacy after the split of their party, those who wanted to build a new constituency, and those who wanted to forge a new space in the public by claiming the state for citizens’ and women’s rights. Hamas3 had not yet formulated a coherent gender vision, but by concentrating their aims on discrediting any group that might change the shari’a— or Islamic jurisprudence—they launched an orchestrated campaign to de-legitimize all women’s organizations. Meanwhile, the new NGOs triggered conflicts with the old organizations over legitimacy, resources, and public space.

The move toward adopting the gender agenda as a national agenda was not based on continuing linkages with Palestinian constituencies or national activism. Rather, it was enabled by international NGOs and other international players, who handpicked their Palestinian counterparts to speak on behalf of the national interest. Later, after the second Intifada from 2000–2005, the national agenda was hijacked by international NGOs, foreign states, and donors, and concentrated on peace building, conflict resolution, and related issues.

In conjunction with NGO-ization, the period between 1988 and 1994 witnessed a proliferation of feminist women’s organizations. Women’s activists wanted specialists (motakhassissin) on boards or in NGO administrations to push their work forward, introduce different interests, and provide an alternate vision. The growing number of women’s organizations therefore propagated a new discourse on the status of women in Palestinian society, but only within the context of a steady decline in women’s mobilization efforts.

The dichotomy between “professional” and “political” was one of the factors that undermined the kinds of initiatives found previously among women’s organizations in Palestine. Professionalization refers to the preference for modern communication mediums, English, and technical writing. The phenomenon produces upward rather than downward accountability and exclusion rather than inclusion, and “scaling up” brings bureaucratization. As Friedman (1992) notes, “power tends to drift upward, [and] professionalisation (which is almost always dis-empowering) takes over.” This form of professionalization replaced activist women in grassroots organizations.

Simultaneously, there was an increased demand by international women’s and human rights organizations to include Palestinian women’s voices in their activities. This led to what Palestinians call the “militant with a suitcase” (monadel bel hakiba). If the first Intifada witnessed the removal of many women’s leaders from the popular organizations in favor of the international community (through participation in activities and conferences), the second Intifada witnessed a shift to NGO leaders representing the voice of Palestinian civil society. Analyzing this shift, Tabar and Hanafi (2002) refer to what they call the emergence of a Palestinian “globalized elite,” tied more to global actors (i.e., international NGOs) than local constituencies. They were informed by a global agenda, urban and professional, and supported the peace process. The “globalized elite” overturned the old elite (charitable societies and women’s grassroots organizations) through competition over resources, vying to safeguard the continuity of their organizations.
Grassroots women’s rights activists were heavily involved in the Palestinian national movement from the outset. They sought to mobilize public opinion in support of their national right to independence and self-determination. This effort was taken on by the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), mainly outside the occupied territories. As the Palestinian struggle moved toward the occupied territories, women’s movements in these areas were better equipped to express the hardships of living under the Israeli occupation forces.

From the 1990s onward, however, NGO-ization started to affect the formulation of the national agenda. In order to gain legitimacy distinct from that of the grassroots women’s movement leaders, the new activists (NGO leaders) made excessive use of their links with international donors, frequently citing their meetings with important state representatives and news agencies or the international prizes they were awarded for efforts in the “peace process” and women’s advancement. From the perspective of grassroots leaders, this language was not convincing and was instead met with derision. As one of the grassroots leaders told me: “When we organize demonstrations, they stop their cars in front of the demonstrations, get their banners out, and stand in the first row to be photographed. They can sell this to the outside, but nobody buys this internally.”

This behavior stemmed from the transformation of this social cause into a project with a plan, a timetable, and a limited budget. It created a “magic bullet syndrome,” in which NGO staff members believed they needed to demonstrate success by “owning” a project in order to maintain funding. This also created a tendency to gloss over mistakes and present projects as unqualified success stories. These dynamics are seen most visibly through projects associated with “peace” in the region.

The beginning of the “peace process”—visualized in the handshake between Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn in 1993—was accompanied by an abundance of internationally funded projects. Written in highly technical English, the project plans marginalized local grassroots organizers who often speak minimal English. The projects usually involved Palestinian women’s activists meeting Israelis at conferences in Europe or the U.S. to dismantle supposed psychological barriers between Palestinians and Israelis, push women into decision-making positions, and enhance female-centered negotiations. From the perspective of grassroots leaders, this language was not convincing and was instead met with derision. As one of the grassroots leaders told me: “When we organize demonstrations, they stop their cars in front of the demonstrations, get their banners out, and stand in the first row to be photographed. They can sell this to the outside, but nobody buys this internally.”

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The NGO-ization of the National Agenda

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the above analysis, I argue that professionalization, as part of an NGO-ization process, has not led to more participation for an NGO's target group, which is grassroots mobilizers. "Project logic," which is integral to the NGO-ization process, entails a less participatory approach in dealing with issues of public concern. It also entails an exclusive focus on the successful aspects of the project, minimizing its pitfalls and lacunae, which leaves the door open for mistakes to repeat themselves.

Professionalism and project logic also provided a new power base for NGO elites that determine the choice of which women's issues should be brought to public attention. These phenomena push NGOs toward vertical participation and can lead to a further concentration of power in the hands of administrators. The concentration of power can impede the growth of social movements that are better able to articulate the demands and daily needs of Palestinian women. In the changing Palestinian landscape, as noted above, professionalism and project logic have empowered NGO elites to determine which women's issues should be brought to public attention. Yet these elites may be out of touch with the broad constituency that makes up Palestinian civil society. This lack of legitimacy and connection risks weakening calls for more equitable gender relations and may even empower more conservative actors in civil society, such as Islamist groups.

Analysis of the "Donor-NGOs" in Palestine shows the extent to which NGO representatives can use funds earmarked for peace to further their own agendas, through events such as meetings, workshops, conferences, and rallies. The NGOs’ global ties created the NGO-ization of the national agenda in Palestine, transforming it from a struggle to realize self-determination and sovereign statehood into projects for donor funding, in which donors play a vital role in choosing their local representatives.

The rise of the term “NGO” as a development buzzword results in the tendency to mistake any and all of the organizations who adopt this language as progressive and democratic. In the case of Palestine, the discourse of NGOs was used to forge a space in the public arena at the expense of existing grassroots organizations. It spoke less to the overall social, economic, and political context than to the desires of the donors and elites who propelled the organizations’ rapid growth. Against this background, Palestinian women’s NGOs might have, however inadvertently, disempowered, delegitimized, and fragmented secular actors and their movements. The Palestinian case is a vivid reminder of the need to look beyond NGOs and their agenda in order to view the reality on the ground.

ENDNOTES

1. NGO-ization refers to the process through which collective social issues are transformed into projects by NGOs, without taking due consideration of the economic, social, and political factors affecting the issues.

2. The first Intifada was a popular peaceful uprising against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem that began in December 1987 and ended in 1993 with the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993 between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

3. Hamas is the Islamic Resistance Movement that started to play a major role in the Palestinian politics since its launching in December 1987 after which it became a strong rival to the leading Palestinian movement of Fateh.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE SERIES

This brief is part of a series on “Women’s Grassroots Mobilization in the MENA Region Post–2011.” The briefs were presented at workshops in Rabat, Morocco and Amman, Jordan in February and March 2020 hosted by the Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis and the American Center for Oriental Research and involving scholars and activists from Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Turkey, Palestine, and Jordan. The workshops were funded with the generous support of the Kelly Day Endowment as part of the Baker Institute’s program on Women’s Rights, Human Rights and Refugees.

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