



THE STATE AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN TUNISIA: MOBILIZATION, INSTITUTIONALIZATION, AND INCLUSION

Valentine M. Moghadam, Ph.D.
Northeastern University

September 2018

© 2018 by the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University

This material may be quoted or reproduced without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given to the author and the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy.

Wherever feasible, papers are reviewed by outside experts before they are released. However, the research and views expressed in this paper are those of the individual researcher(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy.

Valentine M. Moghadam, Ph.D.

“The State and the Women’s Movement in Tunisia: Mobilization, Institutionalization, and Inclusion”

This report is part of a two-year research project on pluralism in the Middle East after the Arab uprisings. The project is generously supported by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York

Introduction

In 2011, Tunisia embarked on a democratic transition (albeit a bumpy one) that has won accolades internationally. To this day, it is the only Arab country that successfully overthrew a regime without experiencing chaos, armed rebellion, military rule, or external military intervention. Women's and women's rights organizations constituted a visible and vocal presence. The focus of this report is the institutionalization of the Tunisian women's movement, defined in part by the legal and policy achievements and in part by women's presence across domains—political parties, parliament, cabinet, civil service, professional associations, academia, and trade unions. Specifically, various dimensions of such institutionalization and inclusion are:

- Organizational infrastructure (formal and informal groups; older and newer ones)
- Ratification of key international conventions
- The ability of women's movement actors to accumulate political and social assets to support their claims and achieve their goals (pre- and post-2011)
- Different types of mobilization across time (especially since 2011)
- Women's movement actors and where are they represented across domains
- Legal reforms and policy achievements
- Public attitudes

The main argument in this report is two-fold. First, institutionalization is the product of the history of state feminism but also of decades of research, advocacy, and activism on the part of the feminist organizations, created as they were by highly accomplished and dedicated Tunisian women academics, artists, journalists, lawyers, and other professionals. Women in Tunisia, therefore, enjoy not only an array of rights (first enshrined in the 1956 *Code du Statut Personnel* and later in the 2014 Constitution) but also are found across many social domains.

Second, although Tunisian feminists prioritize action on domestic violence and unequal inheritance, the major drawback to women's full and equal citizenship lies in their low labor force participation, itself largely a product of a difficult economic environment domestically as well as globally. Although highly educated women fill the professions and are especially evident in the coastal cities, most Tunisian women are in fact economically inactive or are unemployed and seeking employment. Such a condition is both a reflection of, and a contributor to, regional and social inequalities—and helps to keep gender inequality intact.

This report draws on primary and secondary sources: interviews conducted in Tunisia between 2012 and 2017; analysis of survey results, public opinion polls, and official statistics; publications of Tunisian women's organizations; and scholarly studies on women, the Arab Spring, and Tunisia. Following this Introduction, the paper sketches a conceptual framework in Part II, drawing on the feminist literature to elaborate on what constitute women's and feminist movements. Part III then provides an overview of the achievements

of the feminist organizations. Part IV consists of sections on women's political, educational, employment, and civil society inclusion.

Orienting Theory

Women's movements are defined as women acting collectively to present public claims based on their gendered identities as women. Women's movements need not be feminist; feminist movements are a subset of women's movements, which in turn are a subset of social movements. Social movements in general, and women's movements in particular, are goal-oriented, and while the more radical ones may be oriented toward broad societal transformation, most have specific legal or policy concerns, expressing the need for recognition, inclusion, representation, and empowerment.

While the substance of such claims varies widely, women's movement activities provide a means for women, in their full cultural and ethnic complexity, to make their gender-conscious ideas public, to participate in achieving their goals, and to change public policy and the state. ... Some movement actor ideas may be feminist in that they seek to change the status of women and challenge women's subordination to men and the gender hierarchies that sustain it. (Mazur, McBride, and Hoard 2016: 653)

How do we assess the influence or efficacy of a women's movement? Here a rich literature has emerged (Kim and Kim 2011; Kittelson 2008; Mazur, McBride and Hoard 2016; Weldon 2002, 2011). Weldon (2002) provides the following indicators to analyse the strength, influence, and mobilizational capacity of a women's movement:

- Number and influence of women's organizations, including membership or scope of activities.
- Proliferation of feminist organizations, bookstores, magazines, research centers, policy agencies.
- Frequency with which women's movement officials are consulted in the media and in other public deliberations.
- Press accounts of their activities, including size and frequency of demonstrations and campaigns.
- Official government references to women's movements, organizations, or rights.
- Public support for the women's movement (as seen, e.g., in public opinion polls and surveys).
- Accomplishments and achievements, especially in the policy and legal domain.
- Women's presence across domains: political parties, parliament, cabinet, civil service, professional associations and fields, academia, trade unions.

At the same time, it is important to recognize differences within women's or feminist movements—differences that may emanate from ideological, political, or religious positionalities and commitments and that might prevent, undermine, or set back advances

in women's empowerment and equality. In Tunisia, for example, religio-political differences that came to the fore in the immediate aftermath of the January 2011 revolution, during the work of the National Constituent Assembly, and that continued through the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2014, created a polarized political culture. Nevertheless, during that period, the main feminist organizations in Tunisia, in concert with their allies in civil society and the political parties, managed to retain key constitutional language on women's equality, violence against women, and political parity, as well as establish a parliamentary system based on proportional representation and the rule of law.

By the definition provided by Mazur et al. (2016), the Tunisian women's movement is predominantly feminist, as will be shown in subsequent sections. As for impact, it is outside the present report's scope to examine official government references or media coverage, although these are available and over the years I have amassed evidence of extensive official references and media reports. Here, the impact of the Tunisian women's movement—the extent of women's movement mobilization and institutionalization toward women's inclusion and empowerment—can be measured by documenting feminist activities and campaigns. These analyses weigh achievements such as legal/constitutional reforms; new policies, mechanisms, and institutions; anti-discrimination and anti-domestic violence legislation; and quotas or parity laws for enhanced female parliamentary representation. In addition, institutionalization and inclusion are assessed by compiling data on women's presence across the polity, economy, and civil society.

Women's Rights Advocacy and Achievements

The history and evolution of the women's movement in Tunisia is closely tied to the nature of the Tunisian state and state-society dynamics since independence. Like other Arab countries, Tunisia's polity has long been authoritarian, but its version of authoritarianism included a *state feminist* orientation and episodes of political liberalization that enabled the emergence of political parties as well as a fairly robust civil society. Indeed, Tunisia was able to produce civil society organizations—notably the trade union and the women's rights associations—that developed critiques of the *status quo* and occasionally challenged government. Tunisia ratified the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1985, albeit with reservations.

Since the promulgation of the 1956 *Code du Statut Personnel* (CSP), Tunisian women have enjoyed the right to monogamous marriage, divorce, and child custody (Charrad 2001), which many Arab women did not enjoy until more recently. However, inheritance continued to follow the Sharia law: women inherited half of what their brothers did. Among other consequences, this has implications for women's ability to set up a business (Moghadam 2006). Moreover, a 1973 directive prohibited the marriage of a Muslim Tunisian woman to a non-Muslim man.

Tunisian feminism arose in the 1970s in circumstances that were both local and global (Arfaoui and Tchaicha 2017; Moghadam 2016). The Club Taher Haddad was a feminist

group named after an early Tunisian male reformist, and the group produced a magazine called *Nissa*. In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, Tunisia was in the grips of changes to its economic model, union strikes, the Israeli bombardment of the PLO headquarters in Tunis, and the rise of Islamism. As President Bourguiba's behavior became increasingly erratic and autocratic due to illness, he was peacefully removed from power in 1988 and in 1989 succeeded by Zein el Abedin Ben Ali. That same year, two feminist organizations that had earlier formed were given official recognition: l'Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) and l'Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement (AFTURD).

The 1990s saw more advances for women's rights and the women's movement. Responding to women's rights activism, the Tunisian state introduced a series of positive amendments to the CSP in 1993. The mother's consent was now required in addition to the father's for the marriage of a minor; a wife's duty of obedience to her husband was replaced by her right to be treated with care and concern; she gained the right to participate in the management of the family's affairs, such as the children's education, travel, and financial matters; and the couple could choose joint or separate financial holdings, to be stipulated in the marriage contract. CSP amendments also included the right of a child born out of wedlock to carry his father's name, receive the father's support until reaching adulthood, and inheriting the same portion as a daughter (Labidi 2007: 25-26).

More legal advances occur in the new century. In 2004, the ATFD secured passage of the country's first legislation combating sexual harassment, while the country's state-financed women's organization, the UNFT, established its own sexual harassment and domestic violence hotline. That same year, the CSP was amended further to permit the mother to give her name to a child if the father is unknown, and to claim a DNA test to prove fatherhood (Labidi 2007: 33).

In 2006, Tunisia celebrated the 50th anniversary of the CSP, an event commemorated with much ceremony by Tunisian feminists and allies in civil society. That same year, AFTURD published a book in two volumes arguing for equal inheritance (AFTURD 2006). In June 2008, the Tunisian government ratified the Optional Protocol to CEDAW (which enables individual women or groups of women to file claims of violations of rights specified in the Convention), but women's groups continued to press for full equality. The next year, the ATFD organized, in Tunis, a Maghreb-wide seminar on "Equality in inheritance" titled "Nothing Justifies Discrimination in Inheritance." Speakers such as Sana Ben Achour, law professor and ATFD official, and lawyer Alya Chérif-Chammari presented strategies for change. In 2010, the ATFD submitted a shadow report to the CEDAW committee's 47th session, calling for withdrawal of all reservations (ATFD 2010).

Further institutionalization occurred through the formation of two women's policy agencies. The government established the Centre de Recherches, d'Etudes, de Documentation, et de l'Information sur la Femme (CREDIF), with the well-known legal scholar, Soukeina Bouraoui, as its first director. The agency was tasked with carrying out studies on various aspects of women's economic conditions and to report these to the

planning ministry. Tunisia also hosted the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), which received funding from various international development agencies (see, e.g., Gribaa 2008-09). Both CAWTAR and CREDIF continue to produce substantive studies on women's economic, political, and social conditions.

One issue that has long preoccupied the women's rights groups is violence. The ATFD had started working on the issue of violence against women (VAW) as early as 1991, and a commission was formed to identify strategies to tackle the growing reporting of domestic violence. An international seminar convened in Tunis on Nov. 11-13, 1993, and published a report, *Les Violences à l'égard des femmes*. In 1993, a person on duty was appointed to receive those women before the ATFD was able to create a real center (*centre d'écoute*) where women would be listened to and their problems addressed.¹ The year 1998 saw passage of a law criminalizing "honor crimes," and an amended Article 218 of the Penal Code introduced punishments for perpetrators of family violence, making the punishment for domestic violence double that of an ordinary offense. The National Office of the Family and Population (ONFP) followed by offering medical care to women victims of family violence, though implementation was stymied because of low reporting, inadequate police training, and lack of public awareness of the law and services. Feminists also complained that enforcement was weak.

In the years prior to the 2011 revolution, feminists advocated for women's equality in all areas, including inheritance, and full implementation of CEDAW; permitting women to marry non-Muslim men; and ending violence against women. These priorities continued after the revolution, and more advances were made:

- 2011: The transitional government declares gender parity in elections and lifts remaining reservations on CEDAW.
- 2012: Protests by feminist groups and supporters defeat attempt by the Ennahdha-dominated Constituent Assembly to replace "equality" between women and men with "complementarity."
- 2012: State-funded women's shelter formed in Ben Arous.²
- 2014: The new constitution codifies gender parity and bans violence against women.
- 2012–2014: ATFD and AFTURD extend networks to Sfax, Sousse, Bizerte, Kairouan; members join coalitions.
- 2014: Women candidates win 31% of seats in October parliamentary elections.
- 2017: Passage of the strongest VAW law to date (July), which also removes the ability of a rapist to avoid prosecution if he marries his victim; abrogation of 1973 law prohibiting a Muslim Tunisian woman from marrying a non-

¹ At a September 2006 seminar in Tunis organized by the regional women's policy institute CAWTAR, Ahlem Belhadj, a former ATFD president, reported that initially the group lacked a strategy on violence against women, but the idea of a hotline for women to report abuse was so well received that the ATFD decided to find a way to tackle the flow of women seeking help. See Arfaoui and Moghdam (2016).

² This was a joint effort of the National Office of Family and Population and the Spanish international development agency (see Mahfoudh-Draoui 2016: 13).

Muslim man (September); introduction of equal inheritance bill in parliament.

Tunisia's family planning office had found that some 47% of women aged 18 to 64 had experienced violence of some kind, but typically domestic. The rape in September 2012 of Meriem Ben Mohamed by two policemen—whose defense was that she had been behaving immodestly with her boyfriend—galvanized Tunisia's feminist population. In September 2014, ATFD organized a national workshop and launched an Action Plan 2015–17 on Violence against Women. In attendance were ATFD representatives from branches in Tunis, Ben Arous, Bizerte, Sfax, Sousse, and Kairouan, who reported on their work. In March 2016, "Espace Tamkin" opened as a women's shelter (*centre d'hébergement*) for 30 persons (women and children) and since then has provided services to 88 women and children. It provides shelter for three months and a work training program (Mahfoudh-Draoui 2016: 13). Finally, in late July 2017, the Tunisian parliament adopted a new law that prosecutes all forms of rape and of private or public forms of conjugal violence (including fiancées, former fiancées, and former wives); prosecution of a perpetrator even if the victim withdraws the complaint; raising the age of consent to 16 (from the previous 13); establishment of a special police unit to handle VAW cases.³

Women's Political, Economic, and Civil Society Inclusion

When compared with other countries in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), Tunisia's indicators on female labor force participation, educational attainment, professional activity, and political participation are quite impressive. Indicators on tertiary enrollment, fertility rates, and women in the judiciary are also impressive (see Table 1).

Political Inclusion: Law and Practice

In the years before the revolution, growing opposition to President Ben Ali and the police state was becoming evident. A rally was held in 2002 to protest a constitutional amendment that would enable Ben Ali to run for a longer term, and human rights and pro-democracy advocates took issue with his 2004 presidential run. In 2009, a left-wing opposition leader was assaulted by police after he criticized the Ben Ali government. Worker protests broke out in 2008 in Gafsa and other industrial enclaves. In 2009, one leading women's rights advocate, Khedija Arfaoui, was called before the police to explain her internet activity. In May 2010, an anti-censorship protest involved many bloggers, including the young female bloggers Emna Ben Jemaa and Lina Ben Mhenni. Critically minded NGOs made extensive use of social media, and it was clear that there was much dissatisfaction with the status quo in the years before Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire.

³ Thanks to Samia Bouslama Letaief (AFTURD and UGTT), who distributed the announcement signed by ATFD, AFTURD, Beity, and LET, on August 1, 2017. In an interview in Tunis on June 19, 2017, law professor Hafidha Chékir, lawyer Hadidha Hayat, and religious studies professor Amel Grami gave credit to one Ennahda woman MP, Yamina Zoghlami, who supported the VAW law.

Table 1. Social/gender indicators at the start of Arab Spring (2010-11), Tunisia and Maghreb

	Algeria	Morocco	Egypt	Tunisia
Paid labor force, F %	17%	28%	19%	25%
Tertiary enrollment, F % age group	34%	12%	14%	40%
Mean age at first marriage, F	29	26	23	27
Total fertility rate	2.4	2.4	2.9	1.9
Female share, seats in parliament (1995-2010)	8%	11% (after 2002 quota)	2-3%	23-28%
Female share of university teaching staff	38%	17%	n.a.	42%
Women in judiciary	37% of total*	24% (first appointed in 1965)	0.46% (first appointed in 2003)**	28% (first appointed in 1967)
Family law	Minor reform, 2005	Major reform, 2004	Patriarchal; <i>khul'a</i> Adopted, 2000	Liberal since 1956; 1998 amendments
State of women's movement	In abeyance	Visible, well-organized	Fragmented, subject to state repression	Visible, well-organized

Sources: World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report*, various years; Sonneveld & Lindbekk (forthcoming).

* The percentage of Algerian female judges jumped to more than one-third after the Bouteflika government appointed 121 women as judges in summer 2010 (Sonneveld & Lindbekk 2017).

** In 2010, 42 out of 9,000. Egypt appointed its first female judge, Tehani al-Gebali, in 2003. Judge al-Gebali was dismissed during a conflict between the Morsy government and the judiciary, at the start of 2013. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125501126>.

With the launch of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in December 2010 and the collapse of the Ben Ali government the following month, feminist groups mobilized to ensure a democratic transition with women. Fearing that the revolution in which they had taken part would come to favor Ennahdha—the Islamist party that had been banned since the

early 1990s—and recalling Ennahdha's regressive stance on women's issues in the past, Tunisian feminists staged a protest on the eve of party leader Rachid Ghannouchi's return from exile in January 2011. Another protest by thousands of women took place in February 2011. Perhaps as a result of the women's protests, but also mindful of the presence of many qualified women, the 2011 transitional government and its four high commissions were careful to include women. In particular, the Haut Commission pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution, réforme politique et transition démocratique promoted women's participation and rights. Out of 115 officials across the high commissions, 30 were women, constituting 26%; this included three female cabinet ministers, although two resigned and only one, the Minister for Women's Affairs, stayed on for the duration of the year's work. It is indicative of Tunisian women activists' self-confidence and expectations that they were critical of the numbers and found women's presence insufficient (Khalil 2014).

In August 2011, a new law guaranteed the right to form political parties. But the explosion of political parties—especially of centrist, center-left, and leftist parties—fragmented what could have been a progressive bloc and helped bring about the Islamist electoral victory. The election for the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) in the fall of 2011 saw Ennahdha winning 37% of the votes. As a result, it formed a three-party coalition government with Ettakatol and the Congrès pour la République (CPR), two secular parties that received a relatively high proportion of ballots cast. Within the NCA, women constituted 28% of the members. Forty of the women deputies in the NCA were from Islamist Ennahdha Party, but the others were very active. Of the numerous parties legalized, three were led by women: the Party of Social Center directed by Salma Ammar; Afek Tunis by Emna Menif (co-directed with Mohamed Louzir); Movement of Democratic Edification and Reform by Emna Mansour Karoui. Maya Jribi was already co-leader of a left-wing party, the Progressive Democratic Party, later called the Parti Républicain. The Modern Democratic Pole, a left-wing coalition party, featured a significant number of women at the head of their electoral lists in 2011, such as Nadia Chaabane of El Massar, the left-wing coalition that included the former communist party.⁴

Prior to the Tunisian revolution, there was no Islamist women's association, in part due to state repression of Islamist activity. Afterward, Islamist women mobilized largely within Ennahdha, which also promoted women candidates to the ANC, 40 of whom were elected. Indeed, Ennahdha's Meherzia Laabidi was appointed vice president of the NCA. But the opportunity for civility between Islamists and secularists was shut down that autumn, when radical Islamists—Salafists as well as others who may have been with Ennahdha—began a campaign to silence or intimidate artists, singers, actors, and progressive professors. In March 2012, students clashed with Salafists who tried to replace the Tunisian flag with a black flag; it took an athletic young woman, Khaoula Rachidi, to climb up the building to remove the Salafist flag and return the Tunisian flag (Souid 2012).⁵

⁴ Tunisia's Communist Party, banned under Bourguiba, was legalized in 1993 under Ben Ali, during a period of post-Cold War political liberalization, and renamed Tajdid.

⁵ On the aggressive behavior of Salafists, see a 2016 report by the International Crisis Group available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/tunisia/jihadist-violence-tunisia-urgent-need-national-strategy>.

In interviews conducted between 2012 and 2014, several feminist activists, including the legal scholar and ATFD militant Hafidha Chékir, told me they preferred to remain in civil society rather than associate with the political parties. Nadia Chaabane of El-Massar, however, disagreed, pointing out that, “We need both political society and civil society if we are to build a sustainable and participatory democracy.”⁶ Indeed, civil society and political society alike reinforced each other. The open political environment and balance of political forces enabled ATFD and AFTURD to establish sections outside Tunis, in Sfax, Sousse, Bizerte, and Kairouan, and to work in coalition with the UGTT, Human Rights League, and figures from the progressive political parties to defeat attempts to roll back women's rights. In 2013, following the assassination of two left-wing political figures, secular civil society organizations joined the progressive political parties to form an opposition movement that coalesced into the Front National du Salut and called for the government's resignation.⁷

Protests in the summer of 2013 could have led to mass resignations within the NCA and the government's collapse, but civil society organizations stepped in to ease tensions democratically. The National Dialogue Quartet, consisting of the trade union UGTT, the employers' organization UTICA, the Tunisian League for Human Rights, and the lawyer's association, served as mediators between the opposition and the government, and negotiated an agreement whereby the government would step down and hand over power to a transitional nonpartisan government following the finalization of the new constitution. Such procedural democracy, combined with a dynamic civil society, remains unique to Tunisia. For its role in the peaceful transfer of power following a very fraught summer, the Quartet was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.

The 2014 Tunisian constitution guarantees the principle of nondiscrimination among citizens; stipulates equality between men and women; guarantees the right to work and health care; and commits the state to end violence against women. Specifically, important achievements to ensure women's political inclusion are Article 46 of the new constitution (on “equal opportunities for men and women to hold positions of responsibility in all areas”), and the last paragraph of Article 34 on the state's responsibility to ensure women's representation in elected bodies. In April 2014, the Tunisian government sent a letter withdrawing its previous declaration regarding CEDAW Article 15(4) and its reservations to Articles 9(16), 16 (C, D, F, G) and 29(1). However, it retained the right to “not take any organizational or legislative decision in conformity with the requirements of this Convention where such a decision would conflict with the provisions of chapter I of the Tunisian Constitution” (Mahfoudh Draoui 2016: 26).

In the October 2014 elections, Tunisia's parliamentary system of proportional representation and the *parité* law enabled a 47% female share of candidates, though only 12% were at the head of the party lists. Eventually, women won 31% of seats in Tunisia's new parliament, and Nidaa Tounès gained most of the parliamentary seats overall. The new parliament looked considerably different from the ANC, especially with the 15 seats won by

⁶ Interview with the author, March 2014.

⁷ Personal communications and interviews during research in Tunis, March 2013 and March 2014.

the far-left Front Populaire, though losses for other progressive parties were significant.⁸ After Beji Caid Essebsi won the presidential election, he thanked the million Tunisian women who had voted for him, and appointed a prime minister who in turn appointed three well-known women to his cabinet: Khedija Cherif, in charge of the ministry of women and the family, Latifa Lakhdar (formerly a vice president of one of the 2011 Haut Commissions), in charge of culture, and Salma Elloumi Rekik, in charge of professional training and employment. Six other women were given posts as secretaries of state.⁹

Yet a 2016 study of women in political and civic life in Tunisia and three other Arab countries, conducted by CAWTAR and financed by Oxfam, finds a poor sense of citizenship and rights among many of the women interviewed, especially those from poor and marginalized areas. It describes the communicative difficulties of the women and identifies poverty, marginalization, and under-education as contributors to women's self-exclusion and the main obstacles to their political participation. According to the study, there was "a lack of self-confidence in the way the women introduced themselves and defined their roles" (CAWTAR and Oxfam 2016: 15). But the study also found a category of women "who expressed a structured, rational view of political matters" (ibid. 16). The role of civil society was cited as especially significant in changing women's perceptions or self-perceptions.

Educational Advances and Women's Inclusion in the Economy

Tunisia has made major advances in schooling. Graduation rates from secondary schools, in particular, stand out. Women's university enrollments began to exceed those of men in the academic year 2001-2002, when some 15,000 women were enrolled compared to 13,440 men (*Revue du CREDIF* 2015: 68). In the academic year 2013-2014, women students made up 61.5% of university enrollments across both public and private universities. The data show that women are not concentrated in the humanities and social sciences but in fact have a good representation across disciplines. In 2013-14, female enrollment constituted the majority (68% to 77%) in the fields of education, arts, letters, administrative and social affairs, law, journalism and information sciences, and social and behavioral sciences—fields that may be considered traditionally feminine. The female share of enrollment in social services was nearly 88%. However, the fields of mathematics, life sciences, physics, and environmental sciences also had very high female enrollments (see Table 2). At the lower end were architecture and building (36.1%) and engineering (36.5%). However, at the master's and Agrégation levels, women earned 53% of the degrees in engineering and nearly 60% of degrees in architecture. The doctoral degrees earned by

⁸ In 2014 Ennahdha won 69 seats compared with the 86 seats for Nidaa Tounès. The breakdown of the 69 women parliamentarians was as follows: Nidaa Tounès 32 (including the well-known constitutional lawyer and feminist activist Bochra Bel Haj Hmida), Ennahda 29 (including Mehrezia Laabidi), Front Populaire 3, l'Union Populaire Libre 2 (including Mbarka Aouania, widow of the assassinated Mohamed Brahmi), and two from two smaller parties. By summer 2016, however, Nidaa Tounès saw the resignation of a number of members due to disagreements with the party leader's actions.

⁹ Thanks to Khedija Arfaoui for sharing the article, "Les femmes du gouvernement Essid", sent January 26, 2015.

women in those fields roughly matched undergraduate enrollment figures. The result of the educational advances is that Tunisian women are found in a vast array of professions.

Table 2. Women's shares across tertiary-level fields of study and presence in the professions

Fields of Study (2013-14)	Female Share (%)
Mathematics and statistics	54
Life sciences	84.9
Physics	71.1
Veterinary sciences	61.3
Agriculture and horticulture	71.3
Health	71.8
Environmental protection	78.9
Transport services	58.4
Women in the Professions	Female Share (%)
Magistrates / judges	29
Lawyers	31
Medical personnel	42
Pharmacists	72
Journalists	34
Women in the media	34
Public sector	21
Primary school teachers	51
Secondary school teachers	48
University instructors	40

Source: *La Revue du CREDIF*, no. 49 (Dec. 2015): 63, 68-69.

The very positive trends in education and the professions provide only a partial picture. Tunisia's women suffer from an untoward economic situation and low demand for their labor, wage gaps in both public and private sectors despite their educational attainment, and inadequate support structures for working mothers. These contribute to, and reflect, social, regional, and income inequalities.

In 2004, President Ben Ali offered women the possibility to work part-time for three-quarters of their salary and the promise of a full retirement. Tunisian feminists argued instead for nurseries and kindergartens for the children of working mothers, because, by 2005, Tunisian women's representation in the workforce had risen to 24.3%, compared to less than 6% in 1966. Women were found in all the sectors of the economy: 43% in manufacturing industries, 32% in agriculture and fishing, and 21% in administration. Fully 72% of pharmacists were women, and females made up 42% of the medical profession, 34% of journalists, 51% of primary schoolteachers, 48% of secondary schoolteachers, and 40% of the teaching staff in higher education. Some 10,000 women were company directors in 2004. In the legal sector, women represented 27% of judges and 31% of lawyers. In 2004 a woman was appointed public prosecutor and another was named judge at the Directorate General of the Higher Institute of Magistrature. Several Tunisian women acquired international renown. In April 2007, Souhair Belhassen was elected president of the Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme (FIDH); Khedija Cherif was elected FIDH general secretary and Sophie Bessis assistant secretary general.¹⁰ In such a context of occupational distribution and professional achievement, Tunisian feminists did not agree to the overall marginal position of women in the workforce.

Ben Salem (2010: 501) refers to studies showing that many employed women find it difficult to balance work and family. The labor law differentiates between the public and private sectors. In the public sector, social insurance is provided, and women are entitled to a paid maternity leave of two months and on-site child care facilities at workplaces with more than 50 workers. There are also special provisions for mothers of small or handicapped children. Private sector employers are not required to provide paid maternity leave, although the law stipulates a leave of 30 days, and new mothers are granted daily leave to breastfeed during working hours, for a year after the birth of their child. Employers are required to provide child care facilities if their employees number 50 or more (Ben Salem 2010: 502; Bernard-Maugiron 2015: 7). Small enterprises are exempted from these requirements. In practice, the larger employers do not always honor the maternity and child care obligations, and private facilities are expensive.

Moreover, Tunisian women may retire at age 60. Family obligations as well as the younger retirement age means that women's pensions are smaller. Although there is no gender distinction in social security provisions, the mandatory requirements only apply to civil servants (Bernard-Maugiron 2015: 8), which may explain why 86% of those in health and public administration are covered. It is encouraging to know that in 2014, nearly 74% of those in manufacturing industry, comprising 67.5% of working women, were enrolled in social insurance (République Tunisienne 2014: 26).

According to Samia Bouslama Letaief, head of the UGTT health sector and longstanding AFTURD member, a campaign is underway to increase maternity leave to three months

¹⁰ In an article titled "Governance, Women, and the New Tunisia" (*Politics and Religion*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2014): 135–64), Khedija Arfaoui and Jane Tchaicha note that the state media made no mention of these achievements.

and introduce a parental leave of six months, and was awaiting passage of the bill by the national assembly: “nous attendons toujours son adoption par l'ARP.”¹¹

According to ILO data, manufacturing employs the largest share of Tunisian female labor force (43%), followed by professional, scientific, and technical/public administration, social security, and human health and social work activities (19.4%), and just 12.3% in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries. Only 7.7% of women are found in wholesale and retail trade. In terms of occupational distribution, the female labor force is concentrated in professional fields (24%); clerical, service, and sales workers (20%); with fully 51% in blue-collar occupations. According to Ben Salem (2010: 501), women made up 39% of the staff in the civil service. Within the health sector, women made up 42% of physicians, 72% of pharmacists, and 57% of dental surgeons. These figures suggest the extent to which public and private services depend on women.

Yet Tunisia's female labor force participation rate is very low by international standards; at 27.2% in 2012 (République Tunisienne 2012) it is about half the rate of OECD countries (53%). At the same time, its female unemployment rate (24% in 2012) is very high by international standards. Despite women's significant educational attainment levels, unemployment is much higher among women than men (nearly twice as high), illustrating the great difficulties women face in trying to strengthen their place in the economy.

The problem seems to originate on the demand side. Well-qualified, university educated women have the highest unemployment rate of any group in the population, at 47.4%, compared to 20.6% among similarly qualified men in 2012 (République Tunisienne 2012). Young people aged 15-29 years constituted 72% of the total number of unemployed.¹² University-educated women experienced a sharp decline in the probability of government employment in recent years; it nearly halved over the course of 2005-2013 for both never married and ever-married women (Assaad et al. 2016: 12). Large numbers of young women, who wish to enter the labor market out of economic need (especially girls from working-class households who attained secondary schooling or less) or to pursue a professional career, find that the lack of demand blocks their entry into the workforce.

Given the large proportion of working women in manufacturing, the shock of the Great Recession and closure of plants must have been substantial, contributing to the both unemployment and to the “discouraged worker” effect. Without access to detailed data, one can only conjecture job losses for working class women as a result of the export and investment declines.¹³ In 2010, the unemployment rate of women graduates was 32.9% compared with 15.8% for men (CREDIF 2015: 70).

¹¹ Personal communication via email, June 4, 2017.

¹² “Tunisia: High rate of unemployment among youth and women,” *Tunis Times*, May 25, 2014.

¹³ Mechanical and electronics manufacturing and automotive components have been the most dynamic export sectors from the 1990s, outstripping the previously dominant textiles and garments sector. Exports of textiles and garments sector declined from 42% of all merchandise exports in 2004 to 27% in 2008. In contrast, exports of electric and electronics and chemicals increased to 30% (Ayadi and Mattoussi 2014, Appendix Table A3, p. 15). Together with agro-food production, these are the

In sum, gender inequality in the labor market (especially in the private sector), high rates of female unemployment, and stratification within the female population—in an overall untoward economic environment—have greatly contributed to widespread social inequality, economic exclusion, and disadvantage for Tunisian women.

Social and Regional Inequalities

According to Samia Letaief (response to questionnaire, email, June 4, 2017):

Selon les lois, les femmes ouvrières devraient travailler dans de bonnes conditions, mais la réalité est autre surtout dans le secteur privé et particulièrement les ouvrières agricoles. En effet, pas de couverture sociale, 10 à 12 H de travail par jour, très mauvaises conditions de transport, pas de congé payé, pas de sécurité au travail, arrêt du travail à tout moment, l'exploitation continue ... Les ouvrières des secteurs textiles et de l'électronique travaillent en général dans le respect des lois. Elles sont plutôt syndiquées et mieux organisées (see translation in footnote).¹⁴

Available data show a mixed or possibly polarized picture of women, work, and well being. Government sources show that the highest female labor force participation (FLFP) rates—that is, above 30—are found in coastal and relatively affluent areas such as Tunis, Ariana, Ben Arous, Manouba, Nabeul, Zaghouan, Sousse, and Monstir. The highest female unemployment rates are found in the country's interior, reaching 40% to 46% in Kebili, Gafsa, and Tataouine (République Tunisienne 2014: 16). These rates are often two to three times higher than the unemployment rates for men.

Tunisia's interior lacks the infrastructure, transformation, and information networks that the northeast and the coastal areas enjoy. Healthcare needs are largely unmet in low-income areas such as Jendouba, Le Kef, Kasserine, and Gafsa. Some 60% of women suffer from health problems and just 10% have access to healthcare (Elrahi 2015). Youth illiteracy and drop-rates are also significant in these areas; 40% of women are illiterate in these locations.

A 2013 study commissioned by CAWTAR and financed by UNESCO and the Dutch government (Ben Salem and Ben Cheikh, 2013) is an example of the way that women's policy agencies address the conditions of low-income women in the country's interior. Drawing on in-depth interviews with young women in particular, the study identifies women's vulnerabilities as absent or weak cultural capital, economic precarity, and social precarity. Young women's approach to politics can be characterized in one of the four following ways: disaffection, self-exclusion, perplexity (regarding political questions), and sustained interest in politics (pp. 31-32). The investigators of this study find that various

pillars of productive capacity in manufacturing. The textiles and garments sector is relatively labor intensive and remains heavily feminized (Jaud and Freund 2015; see Fig. B1.1.1, p. 2).

¹⁴ Translation: "As per the laws, women workers must work under good conditions, but the reality is different in the private sector and especially for agricultural workers. Lack of social insurance, 10-12 hour workdays, very bad transport conditions, lack of paid maternity leave, lack of job security, work termination at any moment, exploitation continues ... Workers in the textiles and electronics sectors generally work under legal conditions. Such women workers are for the most part unionized and better organized."

factors such as illiteracy, unemployment, and geographic isolation from the political center prevent young women from “investing in politics” (*l'investissement politique*) (p. 52). The Governorate of Kasserine, for example, has a high rate of female illiteracy (43%), and a high rate of unemployment of college-educated youth (39%). Some of the women interviewed complain of unemployment and lack of progress after the revolution; others believe in parity but complain of the silencing of women's voices; one woman celebrates the new freedoms after the revolution.

How has the government responded to female unemployment and economic exclusion, especially in the interior? In 2016, the Tunisian government reached agreement with the IMF for a \$2.8 billion bailout to cope with the economic and political transition and to help fund its new development plan 2016-2020 (République Tunisienne 2016). In its note to the IMF, the leading sectors proposed for policy interventions are the knowledge economy, health and social care, tourism, and modern agriculture. One goal is to significantly increase women's share of the labor force to 35%. Another goal is to increase the size of the social care sector. This entails raising kindergarten enrollments from 35% in 2015 to 53% in 2020, and investing in child protection, sports and home-care support. The government has proposed regrouping the existing 289 microcredit associations into 24 institutes (one per region), to be governed by a new microfinance strategy (IMF 2016: 23). If successfully accomplished, this initiative carries the potential to better serve women's entrepreneurship, especially in the country's interior, where FLFP is very low and unemployment rates very high, as noted previously. Nonetheless, more information and data are needed on the availability and quality of childcare centers and pre-school facilities, and the demand for them. This would be especially relevant in the poorest regions such as Sidi Bouzid, Kairouan, and Kasserine.

Inclusion Across Civil Society

Tunisian women have long participated in civil society, whether in professional associations, student organizations, environmental protection associations, human rights organizations, the main trade union (UGTT), the employers association (UTICA), and, of course, the women's rights organizations. Women are very active within the associations of lawyers and judges, and indeed, Kalthoum Kannou, who ran for president but lost to Beji Caid Essebsi in the fall 2014 presidential election, was at one time head of the judges association. Well-known women lawyers include Radhia Nasraoui, who defended Islamists during Ben Ali's time, Leila Ben Debba, who defended bloggers and called for a secular and democratic Tunisia after the revolution, Alya Cherif Chammari, and Hafidha Chékir and Bochra Belhaj Hmida, both with the ATFD.¹⁵

Although women workers and employees represent a large proportion of the UGTT, and several women trade unionists hold leadership posts within the sectoral unions, feminist

¹⁵ A very interesting article in a French magazine features Leila Ben Debba, with a photo of her in her lawyer's garb carrying a Tunisian flag. See “Nous exporterons notre révolution à tous les pays du Maghreb: Leila Ben Debba,” *Paris Match*, no. 3218 (special issue, “Tunisie: Le Souffle de la Liberté,” 20-26 janvier 2011): 67.

activists have been perplexed and dismayed by the absence of women in the UGTT executive committee. In the January 2017 elections, only one woman was elected to the 13-person executive (SGA). In an interview in Tunis on June 19, 2017, Samia Letaief told me that she would no longer speak of gender equality, only of gender inequality. However, she also noted that “après 70 ans et beaucoup de batailles et lors du 23^{ème} congrès ... nous avons pu passer le projet de loi qui exige au moins deux femmes dans toutes les structures syndicales.”¹⁶ In a brief discussion at the UGTT headquarters in Tunis on June 18, Anouar Ben Kaddour, a senior UGTT official, said that at the annual ILO conference in Geneva, the tripartite Tunisian delegation included one woman among the delegates representing the UGTT, but almost an equal number of women and men representing the government (Ministry of Social Affairs).

Women also are active in the employers' association, UTICA. Leila Haiat, a UTICA official and owner of two enterprises, agreed that much needed to be done to improve the conditions of women workers in the private sector, and especially in the small enterprises, especially in the rural areas. She also decried wage inequality. The labor law, she said, distinguishes between the public and private sectors; protection is not provided in much of the private sector: “I do not agree with the division; we should have a unified law.”¹⁷

Within the university sector, not only do female students predominate, but a large proportion of the teaching staff is female. Moreover, according to Samia Charfi Kaddour, professor of physics at the University of Tunis, El Manal: “Il y a de plus en plus de femmes qui ont un pouvoir de décision, qui sont responsables de laboratoires ou unités de recherche. Au Ministère, il y a presque autant de femmes (40%) que d'hommes (60%) au poste de directeur général.”¹⁸

Implications

Tunisian women have benefited from decades of state feminism, an institutionalized feminist movement, and a democratic transition that has enabled more initiatives for recognition, representation and inclusion. This report examined how the women's rights activists in Tunisia have mobilized and helped affect legal and policy changes under conditions of both authoritarianism and democracy. As such, the feminist movement is institutionalized in Tunisia and the movement continues to be an activist one in order to secure further gains for Tunisian women. The gains have been impressive but gaps and deficits remain. Other than highly educated professional women, most Tunisian women remain economically inactive, with unemployment woes hitting educated young women hardest. Working conditions in the private sector leave much to be desired. Since 2014, problems within Nidaa Tounès and the government have led to resignations, cabinet

¹⁶ Translation: “After 70 years and many struggle and in the wake of the 23rd [UGTT] congress ... we were able to adopt a policy requiring at minimum two women in every structure of the union.”

¹⁷ Interview with Leila Haiat, UTICA, Tunis, July 20, 2017.

¹⁸ Translation: “There are more and more women decision-makers, in charge of laboratories or research units. At the ministry [of Higher Education] there are nearly as many women (40%) as men (60%) in positions of director-general.” Response to questionnaire via email, July 17, 2017.

reshuffles, and stalemates, ultimately resulting in a stalled policy agenda. As Samia Letaief stated, “La transition démocratique a réussi sur le plan politique et plus au moins sur le plan démocratique mais pas sur le plan gouvernance et développement.” (June 4, 2017).¹⁹

According to the NDI survey of September 2015, women show dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs in Tunisia, including the cost of living and unemployment, strikes, the quality of public health care and public schooling (although interestingly, they appear satisfied with the cost and quality of kindergartens), environmental quality and cleanliness, the length of maternity leave in both public and private sectors. Fully 71% of respondents believed that the government and employers should introduce more favorable opportunities for women to join and remain in the labor force. Some 45% thought women were sufficiently involved in sociopolitical debates (32% thought the level was insufficient) but 43% agreed that the women members of the national assembly defended the rights of women (21% disagreed). Half the respondents felt that female parliamentary representation should be equal to that of men. The picture that emerges, therefore, is one of pride in the achievements of the women's movement, and of women in the political process, but recognition of structural and institutional difficulties, including the government's incapacity. I end with an observation shared by a young Tunisian woman I met on the flight from London to Tunis on June 17, 2017, who had recently received a doctorate in marine biology and had attended a conference in London:

“After all the crises and terrorism that we have endured, some people feel that things were better before. But they need to realize that [the achievements of] the French Revolution didn't happen in a day. I went to Morocco recently and the first thing I saw at the airport was a huge portrait of the king. Before the revolution, we had such large photos of Ben Ali everywhere. Now we don't, and we also have freedom of expression.”

¹⁹ Translation: “The democratic transition succeeded in its political project and more or less its democratic [project] but not in terms of governance and development.”

References

- AFTURD. 2006. "Vol. 1: Histoire, Droits et Sociétés; vol. 2: Plaidoyer pour l'Égalité dans l'Héritage." *Egalité dans l'Héritage: Pour une citoyenneté pleine et entière*. Tunis: AFTURD.
- Arfaoui, Khedija and Valentine M. Moghadam. 2016. "Violence against Women and Tunisian Feminism: Advocacy, Policy, and Politics in an Arab Context." *Current Sociology* 64, no. 4 (July): 637-53.
- Assaad, Ragui, Rana Hendy, Moundir Lassassi, and Chaimaa Yassine. 2016. "Where has all the education gone? Analyzing trends in labor force participation in MENA." Economic Research Forum.
- Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates. 2010. "Women's Rights in Tunisia Declaration." Worldwide Movement for Human Rights.
- Ayadi, Mohamed and Wided Mattoussi. 2014. "Scoping of the Tunisian Economy." *UNU-WIDER* 47. Helsinki: WIDER.
- Ben Salem, Lilia. 2010. "Tunisia." In *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress amid Resistance*, edited by Sanja Kelly and Julie Breslin, 487-516. Lanham and New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers and Freedom House.
- Ben Salem, Maryam and Soumaya Ben Cheikh. 2013. "Politique et Jeunes Femmes Vulnérables en Tunisie: Etude Qualitative Gafsa – Kasserine – Tozeur." Tunis: UNESCO.
- Benstead, Lindsay. 2016. "Explaining Egalitarian Attitudes: The Role of Interests and Exposure." In *Empowering Women after the Arab Spring*, edited by Marwa Shalaby and V. M. Moghadam. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bernard-Maugiron, Nathalie. 2015. "Supporting Women as Economic Actors in the Middle East and North Africa Region." Paris: Programme MENA-OCDE Pour l'Investissement.
- Boughzala, Mongi. 2013. "Youth Unemployment and Economic Transition in Tunisia." *Brookings Institution* 57 (January).
- CAWTAR et Oxfam. 2016. "Women in Political and Civil Life : Obstacles and Challenges to Overcome Them in Morocco, Tunisia, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Yemen." Tunis: CAWTAR.
- Charrad, Mounira. 2001. *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- CREDIF. 2013. "L'autonomisation Economique des Femmes: Un Pari à Gagner." *La Revue du CREDIF* 46 (Aout).
- . 2013. "Tunisienne et action politique" *La Revue du CREDIF* 45.
- . 2014. "Autonomisation Economique des Femmes : Emploi et Entrepreneuriat." Tunis : Centre de Recherches, d'Études, de Documentation et d'Information sur la Femme.
- . 2015. "Chômage des Femmes Diplômées du Supérieur." *La Revue du CREDIF* 49 (Décembre).
- . 2017. "En Attendant la Loi Intégrale : La Violence à L'econtre des Fmmes, Une Réalité alarmante." *La Revue du CREDIF* 50 (Mars)
- Elrahi, Nay. 2015. "Rural women in Tunisia: 'We have been silent for too long.'" *The Guardian*, March 30, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/mar/30/rural-women-rights-tunisia-world-social-forum>.
- Gribaa, Boutheina, Giorgia Depaoli, and Malek Baklouti. 2009. *Mapping of the situation of women's participation in politics in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia*. Tunis: CAWTAR.
- Htun, Mala and Laurel Weldon. 2012. "The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence against Women in Global Perspective, 1975-2005." *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 3 (August): 548-69.
- Jaud, Mélise and Caroline Freund. 2015. "Champions Wanted: Promoting Exports in the Middle East and North Africa." Washington, D.C.: The World Bank Group.
- Khalil, Andrea. 2014. "Tunisia's Women: Partners in Revolution." *Journal of North African Studies* 19, no. 2 (March): 186-99.
- Kim, Seung-kyung and Kyounghee Kim. 2011. "Gender Mainstreaming and the Institutionalization of the Women's Movement in South Korea." *Women's Studies International Forum* 34, no. 5: 390-400.
- Kittelson, Miki Caul. 2008. "Representing Women: The Adoption of Family Leave in Comparative Perspective." *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 92: 323-34.
- Mahfoudh-Draoui, Dorra, Houda Dridi, and Sonia Zekri Amira. 2016. "Tunisiennes et action politique en context post-révolutionnaire." Tunis: CREDIF.

- Mansoor Moaddel. 2013. "The Birthplace of the Arab Spring: Values and Perceptions of Tunisians and a Comparative Assessment of Egyptian, Iraqi, Lebanese, Pakistani, Saudi, Tunisia, and Turkish Publics: A Report." December 15, 2013.
http://mevs.org/files/tmp/Tunisia_FinalReport.pdf.
- Mazur, Amy G., Dorothy E. McBride, and Season Hoard. "Comparative Strength of Women's Movements Over Time: Conceptual, Empirical, and Theoretical innovations." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no. 4 (December): 652-76.
- Moghadam, Valentine M. 2006. "Maternalist Policies vs. Economic Citizenship? Gendered Social Policy in Iran." In *Gender and Social Policy in a Global Context: Uncovering the Gendered Structure of 'the Social'*, edited by Shahra Razavi and Shireen Hassim, 87-108. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- . 2016. "Feminist Movements in the Maghreb." In *Women's Movements in a Global Era*, edited by Amrita Basu, 333-60. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.
- NDI. 2015. "Enquête d'opinion auprès des femmes tunisiennes sur des thèmes d'importance." Tunis: National Development Institute.
- République Tunisienne. 2012. "Enquête nationale sur la population et l'emploi 2012. Tunis : Statistiques Tunisie."
- . 2014. "Recensement en Chiffres / Statistique Tunisienne."
<http://census.ins.tn/fr/recensement>.
- . 2016. "Synthèse du Plan du Développement 2016-2020."
- Robbins, Michael. 2016. "Tunisia Five Years after the Revolution: Findings from the Arab Barometer." www.arabbarometer.org.
- Sonneveld, Nadia and Monica Lindbekk. 2017. *Women Judges in the Muslim World: A Comparative Study of Discourse and Practice*. Leiden: Brill.
- Soud, Lakhdar. 2012. "Le Coeur Palpitant des Tunisiens." *Femmes et Réalités*, no. 16 (Mars): 28-30.
- Weldon, Laurel S. 2002. *Protest, Policy and the Problem of Violence Against Women: A Cross-National Comparison*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- . 2011. *When Protest Makes Policy: How Social Movements Represent Disadvantaged Groups*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- World Values Survey. <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>.