

ISSUE BRIEF **09.03.18**

Gender Inequality and Economic Inclusion in Tunisia: Key Policy Issues

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Tunisia's indicators on female labor force participation, educational attainment, professional activity, and political participation are quite impressive compared to other countries in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) (Table 1). In 2015, women accounted for 40% of tertiary education enrollment, 42% of university professors, and 31% of parliamentary seats. Indicators on school enrollment, fertility rates, and women in the judiciary are also noteworthy, as are three sociopolitical developments. First, since 1956, Tunisia has had a fairly liberal family law that banned polygamy and allowed women the right to divorce—the effects of “state feminism.” Second, the women's movement—as defined by the influence and visibility of women's rights organizations that effect legal and policy changes—is quite strong in Tunisia (it should be noted that civil society in general is quite robust in the country). Third, Tunisia embarked on a democratic transition (albeit a bumpy one) in 2011 that has won accolades internationally.

The very positive gender indicators listed in Table 1, however, provide only a partial picture. Tunisia's women suffer from an untoward economic situation and low demand for their labor; low labor force participation and very high unemployment rates; social and regional inequalities; inadequate support systems for working mothers; persistent domestic violence; and prevailing conservative attitudes, values, and norms toward women's rights. Without changes in these areas, and notwithstanding

the favorable legal environment, Tunisian women lack full social inclusion and economic empowerment. These are key issues that require attention from researchers, policymakers, and women's rights advocates.

This brief provides a comprehensive picture of Tunisian women's employment patterns and problems, along with some policy recommendations. Women's economic exclusion has implications for national development, the tax base, poverty alleviation, household well-being, and women's full civic inclusion (Chamlou and Karshenas 2017; Moghadam 2018; World Bank 2011). Whereas women's rights organizations and policy agencies in Tunisia are aware of the problems of poverty, unemployment, and violence,¹ more attention should be directed—especially by researchers and policymakers—to the causes of low rates of female labor force participation (FLFP) and strategies to enhance both the quantity and quality of women's employment.

FEATURES OF THE FEMALE LABOR FORCE

According to data from the International Labor Organization, most of Tunisia's female labor force works in the manufacturing industry (43%) followed by the professional, scientific, technical/public administration, social security, and human health and social work fields (19.4%). The remainder work in the agriculture, forestry, and fishery sectors (12.3%).



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TABLE 1 — WOMEN'S SOCIAL INDICATORS AT THE START OF THE ARAB SPRING (2010–11)

	Algeria	Morocco	Egypt	Tunisia
Percent of women in the paid labor force	17%	28%	19%	25%
Women's tertiary education	34%	12%	14%	40%
Women's average age at first marriage (years)	29	26	23	27
Total fertility rate	2.4	2.4	2.9	1.9
Percent of women in parliament (1995–2010)	8%	11% (after 2002 quota)	2–3%	23–28%
Percent of women teaching at universities	38%	17%	N/A	42%
Percent of women in the judiciary	37%*	24% (first appointed in 1965)	0.46% (first appointed in 2003)**	28% (first appointed in 1967)
Family law	Minor reform in 2005	Major reform in 2004	Patriarchal; <i>khul'a</i>	Liberal since 1956; amended in 1998
State of women's movement	In abeyance	Visible, well organized	Fragmented, subject to state repression	Visible, well organized

NOTES *The percentage of Algerian female judges increased to more than one-third after the Bouteflika government appointed 121 women as judges in the summer of 2010 (Sonneveld and Lindbekk 2017). **In 2010, just 42 out of 9,000 Egyptian judges were women. Egypt appointed its first female judge, Tahani al-Gebali, in 2003. Judge al-Gebali was dismissed during a conflict between the Morsi government and the judiciary at the start of 2013. See <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125501126>.

SOURCES World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report*; Sonneveld and Lindbekk (2017)

Only 7.7% of women work in wholesale and retail trade. In terms of occupational distribution, 24% of the female labor force works in professional fields; 20% hold clerical, service, and sales positions; and 51% hold blue-collar occupations. According to Ben Salem (2010, 501), women made up 39% of the staff in the civil service. Within the health field, women made up 42% of physicians, 72% of pharmacists, and 57% of dental surgeons. These figures illustrate the extent to which public and private services depend on women.

Despite the high rates of women in both professional and manufacturing fields, Tunisia's FLFP rate is very low by international standards. At 27.2% in 2012, it is about half the rate of that in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (République Tunisienne 2012). Although more women work in Tunisia than

in many Arab countries, the labor force employment of married women is weak for all but a small stratum of professional women who build decades-long careers. Many working women drop out of the labor force when they marry or have children.

At the same time, Tunisia's female unemployment rate (24% in 2012) is very high compared to other countries around the globe. Despite women's significant educational attainment levels, unemployment is nearly twice as high among women than men, illustrating the great difficulties women face in trying to establish their place in the economy. Well-qualified, university-educated women have the highest unemployment rate of any group in the population—47.4%, compared to 20.6% among similarly qualified men in 2012 (République Tunisienne 2012, Tableau 37, 35). Young people aged 15–29 constituted 72% of the total number of

unemployed.² University-educated women have experienced a sharp decline in the probability of government employment in recent years; it dropped by nearly half between 2005 and 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 with no more than a secondary education—or to pursue a professional career find that lack of demand blocks their entry into the workforce.

Women's employment rates and the overall economy in Tunisia took two hits in recent years. First, the Great Recession of 2008 led to plant closures in the ready-made garment manufacturing sector. Given the large proportion of women working in manufacturing, the combined shock of the recession and plant closures likely had a substantial impact on women in the labor force and contributed to both unemployment and the “discouraged worker” effect,³ although detailed data on this issue is not available. Still, one can conjecture that the subsequent export and investment declines resulted in job losses for working class women.⁴ Second, in the wake of the 2011 revolution and the onset of terrorist attacks, investments sharply declined in almost all sectors; foreign direct investment (FDI) flows decreased by 29% in 2011, and 182 foreign firms—including companies based in Italy, France, and Germany—closed their doors, leading to the loss of 10,930 jobs (Ayadi and Mattoussi 2014, 6). The decline in FDI was also severe in the tourism sector. Tunisia is heavily reliant on travel and tourism, which accounted for 11.5% of jobs and 12.6% of GDP in 2015 despite the contraction of the overall economy since 2011 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2016).

SOCIAL AND REGIONAL INEQUALITIES

Government data show that the highest rates of economic activity in Tunisia—that is, above 30%—are concentrated in coastal and relatively affluent areas such as Tunis, Ariana, Ben Arous, Manouba, Nabeul, Zaghouan, Sousse, and Monastir. The highest

female unemployment rates are found in the country's interior, reaching 40% to 46% in Kébili, 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 regions lack the infrastructure, transportation, and information networks that the northeast and coastal areas enjoy. Health care is also lacking in low-income areas such as Jendouba, Le Kef, Kasserine, and Gafsa. In those areas, according to Elrahi (2015), about 60% of women suffer from health problems, and just 10% have access to health care. Youth illiteracy and dropout rates are also significant in these areas; 40% of women in these regions are illiterate. As in other MENA countries, women in Tunisia who have obtained a university education are more likely to be in the workforce—and continue working long-term—than women with only a secondary education or less. This situation may stem from the more conservative social norms among the less-educated population, the lack of skills and job training for women, or the absence of decent jobs—with good wages, benefits, and protections against sexual harassment—for women from lower-income households. Gender inequality in the labor market (especially in the private sector), high rates of female unemployment, and stratification within the female population contribute to broad social inequality, exclusion, and other disadvantages.

WORK-FAMILY RECONCILIATION AND SUPPORT FOR WORKING MOTHERS

Ben Salem (2010, 501) references studies showing that many employed women in the MENA find it difficult to balance work and family. Tunisia's Labor Code mandates different accommodations for women working in the public and private sectors. In the public sector, social security benefits are provided, and women are entitled to two months of paid maternity leave (Ben Salem 2010, 502) as well as on-site child care facilities at workplaces with more than 50 employees. There are also

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special provisions for mothers of toddlers or handicapped children. Private sector employers, however, are not required to provide paid maternity leave, although the law stipulates that new mothers must be granted an unpaid leave of 30 days as well as daily breaks to breastfeed during working hours for a year after the birth of their child. In principle, private-sector employers are required to provide child care facilities if they have 50 or more employees (Ben Salem 2010, 502; Bernard-Maugiron 2015, 7), but small enterprises are exempt from these requirements. In addition, the mandatory requirements in the code only apply to civil servants (Bernard-Maugiron 2015, 8), which may explain why 86% of workers in health and public administration are covered, as these are public sector jobs that provide full social security benefits. It is encouraging that in 2014, the majority of Tunisian women working in the manufacturing sector were enrolled in the social security program (République Tunisienne 2014, 26). As noted above, however, many firms in the private sector do not offer paid maternity leave.

By international standards, Tunisia's paid maternity leave is among the least generous, and the onus is on the employer to finance it. This extra "tax" on the private sector is a disincentive for employers and may be an institutional impediment to women's labor force entry and attachment. Another deficit for working mothers, certainly those from working-class or low-income households, is the absence of a nationwide network of quality and affordable child care facilities. Children usually begin school at age six. Without the means to hire a nanny, or in the absence of a relative who can care for their infants and young children, new mothers drop out of the labor force or decline to enter at all.

GAPS IN FAMILY LAWS, SOCIAL NORMS, AND VALUES

Tunisia's Code of Personal Status (or family law) has been viewed as quite liberal since its introduction in 1956. Nonetheless, men are the household heads in Tunisia; according to the code, "the husband, as

head of the household, must provide for his wife and children within his means and their status within the components of alimony. The wife must contribute to family expenses if she has assets." Moreover, inheritance distribution continues to follow sharia law: women inherit half of what their brothers receive. Among other consequences, unequal inheritance has implications for the ability of women to establish their own businesses (Moghadam 2006).

Sociocultural prescriptions about gender roles have changed less than the secular nature of the state might suggest. According to the sixth wave (2010–14) of the World Values Survey, 71% of respondents agreed that "when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women" (see Table 2). The gender breakdown suggests that more men (82%) than women (58%) agreed with this statement; among women respondents, less than half of those with full-time jobs (48.7%) agreed, while more than 30% disagreed. Other surveys have found that attitudes about women in the workforce are more liberal in Tunisia than elsewhere in the MENA region, especially when compared to attitudes and values in Egypt (see Moaddel et al. 2013); however, conservative attitudes may shift as a result of changing political and economic conditions. In general, the Tunisian public's responses show very low confidence in government institutions—much lower than in Morocco or Turkey. And according to recent Arab Barometer findings, Tunisians have become dissatisfied with democracy and perceive economic difficulties as the most serious problem facing the country (Robbins 2016).

THE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN LAW⁵

Violence against women is both an obstacle to women's economic participation and a clear manifestation of gender inequality. The problem of violence against women has been long recognized by women's rights organizations. In 1993, for example, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) established a *centre d'écoute*, or hotline, for female victims of domestic violence and sexual harassment. After a

TABLE 2 — WORLD VALUES SURVEY, TUNISIA (6TH WAVE)

Statement	Percent of total population in agreement (Percent of women in agreement)
“If a woman earns more than her husband, it is almost certain to cause problems.”	43% (35%)
“Having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person.”	50% (62.7%)
“If a mother works for pay, her children will suffer.”	78% (69%)
“On the whole, men make better political leaders than women.”	71% (60%)
“On the whole, men make better business executives than women.”	61% (46%)
“Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay.”	80% (76%)
“A university education is more important for a boy than a girl.”	25% (17%)

SOURCE World Values Survey, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSOnline.jsp>

commission was formed to find strategies to tackle violence, an international seminar convened in Tunis on November 11–13, 1993. This resulted in the report *Les Violences à l'égard des femmes*. An amendment to Article 218 of the Penal Code introduced punishments for perpetrators of family violence. The National Office for Family and Population followed by offering medical care to female victims of family violence, though the initiative's implementation was stymied due to low reporting of incidents, inadequate police training, and lack of public awareness of the law and available services.

Tunisia's family planning office found that about 47% of women aged 18–64 had experienced some form of violence, typically domestic. While that statistic was alarming, it was the rape of a woman named Meriem Ben Mohamed in September 2012 by two policemen—who defended their actions by stating that she had been behaving immodestly with her boyfriend—that galvanized Tunisia's feminist population. The ATFD organized a national workshop in September 2014 and launched the “Action Plan 2015–17 on Violence Against Women.”

During the workshop, activists from branches in Tunis, Ben Arous, Bizerte, Sfax, Sousse, and Kairouan reported that their small staffs were unable to cope with the

large number of conjugal violence cases in their regions. Workers from the Bizerte branch stated that victims do not always follow through on their complaints or requests for legal services: “We have to call them, and all are in need of financial help. We try to provide them with help through microcredit grants.” One representative said a man had killed his wife for refusing to wear the *niqab* veil (also known as a *khimar* in Tunisia). There were also cases of sexual violence among the wives of Salafists. The branch in Ben Arous, home to several manufacturing plants, reported providing services to 74 women between December 2013 and January 2014. The women, who were largely illiterate or only had a primary education, had lost jobs following factory closures.

In general, women who experience domestic or community violence may be unwilling or unable to leave their homes, or may be prevented from joining, remaining, or advancing in the labor force.

GOVERNMENT AND NGO RESPONSES

In 2016, the Tunisian government reached an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a \$2.8 billion bailout

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to support the country's economic and political transition and help fund its new 2016–2020 development plan (République Tunisienne 2016). In its note to the IMF, the Tunisian government proposed focusing policy interventions on four leading economic sectors: the knowledge economy, health and social services, tourism, and agriculture. One goal of the plan is to significantly increase women's share of the labor force to 35%. Another goal is to expand the social services sector. This would entail raising kindergarten enrollment from 35% in 2015 to 53% by 2020, and investing in child protection services, sports, programs 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 successful, the plan should better serve women's entrepreneurship, especially in the country's interior, where—as noted above—FLFP is very low and unemployment rates are very high. Building a nationwide social care infrastructure would provide employment opportunities for women, enable mothers to enter and remain in the workforce, and possibly help reduce the high level of female unemployment in Tunisia.

In 2017, government responses to the women's movement resulted in three important milestones. First, the government repealed a 1973 directive forbidding Muslim Tunisian women from marrying non-Muslim men. Second, the parliament introduced the country's most stringent anti-domestic violence law yet. And third, President Beji Caid Essebi indicated support for repealing or revising the unequal inheritance law. Progress on these fronts could provide even more Tunisian women with social inclusion, dignity, and economic and physical security.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

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 of women. Working in concert with the country's large

and influential trade union, human rights groups, professional associations, and the Observatory of Social, Political, and Economic Rights, Tunisia's women's rights organizations have been able to make their voices heard in the new, more pluralistic political arena since the Arab Spring. While the gains have been impressive, gaps and deficits remain, especially in the area of women's economic empowerment. Most Tunisian women, except for highly educated professional women, remain economically inactive, with educated young women hardest hit by unemployment. Working conditions in the private sector could also be improved to accommodate working mothers. Since 2014, problems within the Nidaa Tounès party and the government have led to resignations, cabinet reshuffles, and stalemates, which have ultimately resulted in a stalled policy agenda. As feminist trade unionist Samia Letaief stated, "The democratic transition has succeeded, more or less, on the political front but not in terms of governance and development" ("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") (personal communication, 2017). Attention should now be directed to women's economic participation and empowerment.

First, the government's plan to increase FLFP and women's share of the total labor force would succeed through the construction of preschool facilities and neighborhood child care centers nationwide, along with vocational training for women to staff those facilities. The employment-generation possibilities, for women and men alike, are obvious. As the tax base grows, the government could mandate statutory paid maternity leave across the private sector, which could be financed through general revenue or some combination of government, employer, and employee contributions. Paid maternity leave should be presented as a responsibility of government and employers and as a right of working mothers. The construction of preschool facilities would contribute to stronger FLFP and labor force attachment among married women, and to quality socialization among children. Child care facilities could begin in the poorest regions—Sidi Bouzid, Kairouan,

and Kasserine, located in the central–west region of the country—which experience very low female labor force participation and high unemployment rates. Monitoring and enforcement of the new Violence Against Women law should also be strengthened in these areas to eliminate domestic violence, community intimidation, and workplace sexual harassment.

The high unemployment of new entrants, especially of educated young women, is another policy area in need of urgent attention. As there is some disagreement among experts regarding solutions to the education–labor market mismatch, it would be useful to conduct surveys with students and professors (and not just employers) to determine how and why graduates—even young women with degrees in science, technology, engineering, and math—find it so difficult to secure gainful employment. With regard to women with a secondary education or less who are out of the workforce, the focus should be on examining school curricula and textbooks to determine if they perpetuate traditional gender roles and stereotypes, which would further compound this problem.

Tunisia’s difficult economic conditions and a proposed finance bill to introduce austerity measures generated unrest and protests in January 2018. Thus, fast action is needed to demonstrate a commitment to socioeconomic inclusion and empowerment. Focusing greater attention on the country’s women and their children is the right place to start.

ENDNOTES

1. The two longstanding and active women’s rights organizations are the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) and Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD), which have conducted research and advocacy since 1989. The government–funded women’s policy agency Centre for Research, Studies, Documentation, and Information on Women (CREDIF) works with AFTURD and ATFD members, Tunisian women researchers, UN agencies, and international donors to research various aspects of women’s lives.

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

3. “Discouraged workers” are those who drop out of the labor force following periods of unemployment and inability to find suitable jobs.

4. Mechanical and electronics manufacturing and automotive component production have been the most dynamic export sectors in Tunisia since the 1990s, surpassing the previously dominant textiles and garments sector. Exports of textiles and garments declined from 42% of all merchandise exports in 2004 to 27% in 2008. In contrast, exports of electronics and chemicals increased to 30% (Ayadi and Mattoussi, 2014, Appendix Table A3, 15). Together with food production, these are the pillars of productive capacity in manufacturing. The textiles and garments sector is relatively labor intensive and remains heavily feminized (Jaud and Freund 2015, Figure B1.1.1, 2).

5. This section draws from Arfaoui and Moghadam (2016).

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This issue brief 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.

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Cite as:
Moghadam, Valentine M. 2018. *Gender Inequality and Economic Inclusion in Tunisia: Key Policy Issues*. Issue brief no. 09.03.18. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.

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