

How Tunisia Can Further Advance Its Feminist Movement

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## **I. Introduction**

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Tunisia's emphasis on advancing women's rights has been notable and significant. From Tahar Haddad who openly criticized the misogynistic laws to Tunisia's first president Habib Bourguiba (1956-87), Tunisia has been home to figures who stand at the forefront of advancing feminism for decades. Habib Bourguiba, for example, introduced the Code of Personal Status in 1956 which "included reforms to create gender equality in the areas of marriage, divorce, child custody, and women's social autonomy."<sup>1</sup>

Despite Tunisia's more progressive stance on women's rights, there are still many sectors that Tunisia should be implementing change in. Some areas of weakness include insufficient support for female based organizations, low representation of women in the government, and the need for improvements in the rural areas. In my paper I will be addressing these shortcomings, each in a separate section, and the possible ways to improve them.

The central argument of this paper is: if Tunisia and international players encourage more feminist organizations, female participation in the political process, and give more attention to those living in rural areas, these considerations, together, will render the country far more stable, prosperous, and progressive than its recent history. The shift toward feminism will immensely benefit the whole of the country. Due to space limit, in the sections that follow, we will focus on the feminist dimension of the topic at hand.

## **II. Increasing Non-Government Affiliated Feminist Organizations**

Prior to the collapse of the Ben-Ali regime, the feminist movement has been primarily managed in a top down manner without much consultation from the public. Feminism became political and "a function of the state to promote image of the regime domestically and abroad."<sup>2</sup> During

Bourguiba's movement, for example, the Neo-Destour party, which was led by Bourguiba, handled everything that was women's rights related. After Bourguiba's regime, Ben Ali's regime continued to make feminism a highly state-sponsored and regulated movement. Under Ben- Ali, independent feminist organizations "were supposed to support, not challenge, the government, and they had to be approved by the Ministry of Culture."<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, following the end of the Ben-Ali's rule, grassroots organizations and NGOs finally were given the freedom and engage in making and demanding changes. Tunisian organizations such as the Association l'Egalité et Parité Tunisie (Association of Equality and Parity in Tunisia) and the Ligue de Electrices Tunisiennes (The League of Tunisian Women voters), among many other, were all instrumental in the progresses made following the uprisings. As a result of their persistent efforts, Tunisia "establish[ed] parity on election lists, ... withdr[ew] reservations to CEDAW and elect[ed] women to 27 percent of seats in the Constituent Assembly."<sup>4</sup> To say these female led and female focused organizations were successful would be an understatement.

What is notable is that these organizations had the support of international players as well, such as the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). UNDP was able to utilize "partnerships and effective coordination with other national and international actors... to support[] Tunisian women's participation."<sup>5</sup> Thus, not only are grassroots and NGOs productive and thus should be encouraged, international players should also step in to support these organizations. By empowering these organizations, and thus promoting the growth of them, Tunisia will be able to advance faster and improve a wider range of items.

Beyond the aforementioned organizations, there are countless other organizations to advance women's rights. For example, Aswat Nissa's academy teaches Tunisian women how to

enter the political sphere and become political leaders. Another organization is Chaml, which allows women to be able to share their stories through online platforms such as blogs.

Evidently, feminist grassroots and NGO organizations in Tunisia are both diverse and successful in enacting concrete changes. Thus, in order to improve women's rights and equality, Tunisian organizations should be encouraged to form and also be given the necessary support from international groups such as the UN, philanthropists, and nonprofit investors. In order to help these organizations establish the financial support that they need, there should also be educational programs to teach how to use crowdfunding websites such as Kickstarter, GoFundMe, and Kiva in order for organization founders to successfully launch their institution. The most efficient way to help Tunisia become the progressive country that it has always strived to be is to support it domestically and internationally.

### **III. Increasing Female Participation in Politics**

Currently in Tunisia, women make up only 23% of ministers and 19.5% of Prime Minister Youssef Chahed's cabinet.<sup>6</sup> In 2011, before the uprising, women accounted for a mere 14.89% of the government and 27.57% of the Chamber of Deputies. In the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), the group in charge of writing a new Tunisian constitution after the fall of Ben-Ali, 24% of seats were held by women.<sup>7</sup> Beyond just considering proportional representation, the power that women have in government should also be taken into account. In the NCA, "seven committees [out of 21] have no women among their leadership (president, vice president, rapporteur)." <sup>8</sup> Additionally, "women in the parliament don't play a great role in political decision making. Their roles remain restricted and cosmetic." <sup>9</sup>

It is evident that Tunisia needs to break its notion that politics and political leadership

roles belong to men. By creating this change in the political sphere, the patriarchal culture that Tunisia currently faces will resultantly shift, thus improving the feminist movement and gender equality in the country. Furthermore, a more balanced gender representation in the government will more closely resemble the very society it is meant to serve. Tunisian women will be better represented and thus will no longer be marginalized when political decisions are being made.

According to a 2006 national poll, one of the most common reasons that women do not enter politics is “a lack of interest in public affairs.”<sup>10</sup> It is likely that women dismiss careers in politics because they think of politics as a traditionally male dominated industry; a lack of female role models in this sector further heightens this concept. This is why Tunisia should be actively working to increase female participation in politics immediately so that the next generation of girls will be able to see that working in the government is a pursuable path.

Based on the same poll, another reoccurring reason why women do not work in politics is due to “insufficient self-confidence.”<sup>11</sup> As a result, educational and empowerment workshops and organizations should be encouraged, as well as extensively promoted. Following the revolution in 2011 in which Ben-Ali was ousted and replaced with a full democratization of the country, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) executed many programs to “support women’s voices.”<sup>12</sup> For example, they supported educational courses to help women organize their campaign, and held workshops to improve women’s communication and networking skills.<sup>13</sup> Organizations like NDI are able to equip women interested in politics with the support and tools to give them confidence, and thus aid them in their path to working in the political sphere.

Along with the aforementioned benefits, female political leaders have also been proven to be able to improve multiple sectors of a country. The countries they lead have “higher standards of living and positive developments in education, infrastructure, and health.”<sup>14</sup>

From giving a greater voice to the traditionally silenced, to improving a country's infrastructure, the advantages to having a greater female representation in Tunisian politics are clearly tremendous. Investing in organizations who have the same mission as NDI will be able to result in these long term, beneficial outcomes.

#### **IV. Making Changes in the Rural Areas**

In order to make longer lasting changes in the public's opinion towards feminism in Tunisia, the government should be focusing on rural areas, which generally have higher poverty and higher unemployment rates. By improving this demographic of the Tunisian population, support for feminism will increase because people with "limited... economic opportunities are more likely to support conservative parties... which often works against women's causes." <sup>15</sup>

In Tunisia's rural areas, poverty "is about 50 percent higher than the national average and more than twice the rate seen in large cities." <sup>16</sup> This unemployment is because employment opportunities are heavily concentrated in the urban, northeast part of Tunisia, not in the rural, southwest region of Tunisia. <sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, in the rural areas, the primary employers are agriculture related jobs which currently "offer only low-productivity and low-pay employment."

<sup>18</sup> For the college educated youth in rural Tunisia, they may want to "start a farming business [but] they often lack the financial resources and own little or no land." <sup>19</sup> In order to get a formal job, these individuals will have to join a popular waitlist that will take a long time to get off. <sup>20</sup> Ultimately, in order to increase the supporters of progressive issues, such as female rights, these economic problems need to be tackled and thus slowly lead to a modernization of Tunisia's rural regions.

Instead of trying to rapidly industrialize the rural areas and make the entire country

metropolitan—a goal that will be impossible to achieve—the Tunisian government should be focusing on ways to make agriculture become a substantial and stable income source for those living in the rural areas. In order to accomplish this, “improving productivity in agriculture is part of the solution”<sup>21</sup> as well as increasing the available financial resources. By investing in technology and infrastructure that may help the farmers produce more goods, and thus earn a greater profit, rural farmers will be able to make their way out of poverty faster. Some initiatives may include better irrigation systems, including “more efficient water production techniques and cropping patterns.”<sup>22</sup> In order to better employ the educated youth who want to start their own farming business but are hindered by financial reasons, the government should provide loans and the youth should be taught how to get micro loans from websites such as Kiva.

By tackling these economic problems, and thus slowly leading to a modernization of Tunisia’s rural regions, the supporters for progressive issues, such as female rights, will increase.

## **V. Conclusion**

Increased support for feminist organizations, greater female representation in government, and economic stability in rural Tunisia, will all pave the way to greater equality for Tunisian women. The effects of gender equality go beyond the obvious; the modernization of the country will also catalyze a multitude of benefits ranging from decreasing unemployment to a greater influence in the international sphere. However, it is significant to note that improving Tunisia cannot be done without the assistance of both Tunisian government and non-domestic organizations.

At the crux of the current problem is a problem with ideology. The traditionally patriarchal nature of countries in the MENA region is a fact that still exists today. However, with the introduction of these reforms, women will gradually be brought to a position where they have

just as much economic, social, and political power as men.

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### Endnotes

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