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Women in Transition: Fighting Mentalities And Ensuring Political Participation in Post-revolutionary Tunisia

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Women in Transition: Fighting Mentalities
And Ensuring Political Participation in Post-revolutionary Tunisia

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Abstract

Although democracies look different across the world, they all share a few things in common. One of the biggest factors which contributes to a strong democracy is an active and engaged civil society. Without people upholding the government and keeping them accountable for their actions, government officials feel they can do as they wish.

Tunisia has recently undergone a democratic transition and is working on forming a stable democracy. Since the fall of the Ben Ali regime, civil society organizations have sprung up all over the country. These organizations are working to safeguard the principles of the new constitution and the new democracy in Tunisia. Women are the driving force behind these civil society organizations. It is these organizations and the women directing them that are seeking to ensure democratic principles apply to everyone in Tunisia.

By examining the rights of women, we can examine the strength of a democracy. This study seeks to do just that by analyzing women's involvement in civil society prior to and after the revolution. Two organizations in particular that aim to increase women's political participation in politics are examined, Aswat Nissa and the League of Tunisian Women Voters.

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Introduction

In order to evaluate the vitality of a democracy, one can examine the rights guaranteed to minorities. "...A good litmus test for the quality of citizenship is to view democracy from the standpoint of its most disadvantaged citizens. Among these, women stand out most clearly as citizens whose formal status has shifted from exclusion to inclusion, but who visibly continue to be excluded."¹ In this paper I will briefly discuss the history of women's rights in Tunisia as it relates to the current events taking place in the country and specifically women's participation in government. The majority of the paper will be devoted to examining women's political participation in the years following the revolution through the lens of civil society organizations. The goals of these organizations are to train women in order for them to attain leadership positions in government and the public life.

Tunisia is a unique case in terms of women's rights. Since 1956, Tunisia had enacted some of the most progressive laws regarding women in the MENA² region. Yet, after the revolution in 2011, women found themselves fighting for rights guaranteed to them since 1956. How did this phenomenon occur? How is it that Tunisian woman, whose rights were institutionalized for over 54 years, were suddenly faced with having the phrase, "women are complementary to men," inserted into their new constitution? I will seek to explain why, even though women were given firm legal rights, these rights did not manifest themselves in the mentality of the society. The role of women in civil society organizations before, during, and after the revolution and their work to advance the rights of women will be the focus of the second half of this paper. I will trace women's involvement through the revolution until today and discuss the importance of various civil society organizations and their effectiveness in terms of building a stronger democracy in Tunisia.

¹ Robin Luckham et al., *Democratic Institutions and Politics in Context of Inequality, Poverty and Conflict: A Conceptual Framework*, IDS Working Paper 104 (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2000), 26-27.

² MENA refers to the Middle East and North Africa and is a common way scholars today describe the region.

In order to gather my primary research I conducted semi-structured interviews with women from various organizations which existed before and after the revolution. I began with organizations which were created following the revolution. This included The League of Tunisian Women Voters (LET)³ which trains women to gain leadership positions in public life, and Aswat Nissa⁴, whose sole objective is to train women in politics to gain access to decision-making positions. For gaining information about women's participation in civil society prior to the revolution, I interviewed the former president of the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (ATFD), which was established under the Ben Ali era and advocated for a variety of women's issues. I also spoke with a feminist activist from the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT). Additionally, I interviewed several women who served in government positions since 2011 and attended a reception following a training session with Aswat Nissa.

Essentially, I created a case study of what these organizations have accomplished since their creation and the ways in which they are trying to use the current laws to challenge the mentality of society. There are many inconsistencies in the law regarding women's rights. Women realize this, and all over the country there are initiatives to challenge these mentalities.

For my secondary research I used sources from the SIT online library, as well as information I obtained from a visit to the Center for Research, Studies, Documentation and Information on Woman, in Tunis (CREDIF). It is my hope that this project will serve as an examination of the current strength of civil society and the newly established democracy in Tunisia by exploring the rights of women to participate in public life and specifically in the government.

In this paper I will argue that women were the main mobilizers behind the revolution

³ LET is the French acronym and stands for Ligue des Électriciennes Tunisiennes.

⁴ Aswat Nissa means voices of the women in Arabic.

and that the current success of the democratic transition in Tunisia can be measured by evaluating the state of women's rights in the country.

History of Women's Rights in Tunisia

Creation of the Personal Status Code

Tunisian women are accustomed to having certain freedoms and have historically enjoyed more rights than women in other parts of the MENA region. This is thanks to the first president of the newly independent Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba, who was committed to women's emancipation. Before Bourguiba had even written a new constitution he created the Personal Status Code (CSP),⁵ a document ensuring women's rights were legalized.

The CPS was enacted in August of 1956, just six months after Tunisia gained independence from France. Bourguiba devoted his summer to drafting the CSP, completing the final draft even before the monarchy was officially abolished and before Bourguiba's status moved from prime minister to president.⁶ The code itself centered around family laws and included things such as banning polygamy, granting women the right to divorce and allowing women to have custody over their own children. These laws helped women gain many freedoms, for without them they were subject to the whims of their husbands or male relatives. Hence the significance of the CSP should not be overlooked as "family law is the key to the gate of freedom and human rights for women."⁷ However, these freedoms did not necessarily translate into society and the mentality of the culture. Furthermore, the document was not comprehensive in granting women equal rights with men.

Though the document was unlike anything that existed in other countries in the MENA region, there were several aspects of family life Bourguiba failed to modify. For

⁵ I will be using the French abbreviation, CPS, which stands for Code du Statut Personnele, since that is how the Personal Status Code is referred to in Tunisia.

⁶ Mounir Khélifa, "Tunisian Revolution II: First Democratic Transition," (lecture, SIT Study Abroad Center, Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia, September 9, 2015).

⁷ Mounira M. Charrad, *Family Law Reforms in the Arab World: Tunisia and Morocco*, (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 2012), 1.

instance, laws regarding inheritance remained the same as they had always been. Women were only able to inherit half of what a man could inherit.⁸ To this day, inheritance is still a contested issue in Tunisia and the laws have yet to be changed. The second issue was the right for women to pass on their citizenship to their children, which was expressed in the Tunisian Code of Nationality.

Although the code allowed for women to have greater autonomy in their marriage, it retained inequality by granting guardianship⁹ rights to the husband. Ben Ali later had this law amended in 1993, allowing for Tunisian women to transfer their nationality to their children, even if married to a foreigner. However, this law still required the father to give his approval. Thanks to the campaigning of several women's organizations, this law was altered in 2010 to enable women to pass on their nationality to their children without approval from their husbands.¹⁰ While more work remains in order for women to be seen as equals in society, organizations such as those involved in canvassing for an amendment to the Tunisian Code of Nationality are paving the way.

Even though Bourguiba instituted progressive policies towards women, they were created by the state to serve the needs of the state. This top-down approach served to advance women's legal rights but the ideas regarding women's equality outlined in the CSP never truly took root in society. Bourguiba's main concern during his time in power was creating a strong modernized state free of colonial rule. The creation of the CSP was part of this broader plan to further develop the state of Tunisia.¹¹ To Bourguiba, women's rights were a way to advance the state. Thus, through the years Bourguiba continued to solidify women's rights

⁸ Asma Ghribi, "Will Tunisian Women Finally Inherit What They Deserve?," *Foreign Policy*, February 7, 2014, accessed November 24, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/07/will-tunisian-women-finally-inherit-what-they-deserve/>.

⁹ Guardianship refers to legal rights concerning the child while custody refers to day-to-day duties. While women were given equal custody of their children through the CSP, they had no legal rights to their children. (Ibid.)

¹⁰ Ahlem Belhadj, interview with author, La Marsa, November 25, 2015.

¹¹ Charrad, *Family Law Reforms in the Arab World*, 4.

through legal institutions. For example, the June 1, 1959 constitution stated that “women are full citizens with complete legal equality and civic duties... all women over the age of twenty have the right to vote and women can stand for all public offices open to men.”¹²

As Bourguiba continued to build a new and modernized Tunisia, he began to ratify international conventions relating to women’s rights. This helped to solidify Tunisia’s image as a progressive country within the international community. Following Bourguiba, Ben Ali would continue to flaunt women’s rights in order to showcase the modernity of the state.

Of the conventions that Tunisia ratified in respect to women’s equality, the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979, is by far the most crucial since it is considered one of the most important pieces of international legislation related to women’s rights.¹³ Albeit Tunisia signed with reservations, coming from article 9,15, 16, and 29, which relate to issues of property rights, men and women’s rights in the family and nationality,¹⁴ the mere act of signing was a way for Tunisia to show they world they were serious about women’s rights. In 2014 Tunisia lifted all restrictions on CEDAW, the first country in the region to do so.¹⁵ In doing so, the new Tunisian government affirmed its commitment to promote women’s rights.

Women’s Activism

In addition to ratifying international conventions, Bourguiba also created the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT) in 1956. Additional women’s organizations were allowed to operate, but only with permission from the state. In reality, these organizations existed to

¹² Courtney Joline, *Women in Post Revolutionary Tunisia: Political Inclusion and Prospects for the Future*, (Sidi Bou Said, SIT Study Abroad, 2012), 9.

¹³ Najla Abbas, “Tunisian Women: Political Role, Gains and Challenges (The Case of Parity),” in *A New Paradigm: Perspectives on the Changing Mediterranean*, (Washington, D.C. : Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2014), 225.

¹⁴ “Tunisia: Landmark Action on Women’s Rights,” Human Rights Watch, accessed November 28, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/04/30/tunisia-landmark-action-womens-rights>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

serve the state and were not indigenous.¹⁶ They served to promote the state's idea of women's rights. The use of women for political propaganda continues today as some parties use women to appeal to a wider audience of voters and create a more modern image of themselves, all the while barring women from attaining decision making positions.

As Ben Ali's rise to power was beginning, so too was women's organizing and activism. The 1980s and 90s brought feminist rhetoric into the public sphere for the first time.¹⁷ Indeed many of the women who were active at this time remain active today in organizations such as LET and continue to champion for equality. Though women were becoming more outspoken and involved in feminist issues, there were very few women's autonomous organizations at this time. This is not surprising considering "women's civil society engagement appears to be much higher in democratic polities than in authoritarian ones. Under authoritarian regimes, women's associations are often "co-opted into state-controlled umbrella groups."¹⁸ While the UNFT falls into this category, several autonomous organizations created at the beginning of Ben Ali's reign, were truly independent organizations operating apart from the state.

Ben Ali was a repressive dictator and during his reign freedom of speech was limited, which meant all of civil society was heavily monitored. Today, many Tunisians have an altered view of civil society as a result.¹⁹ While many civil society organizations did exist under Ben Ali, they were not autonomous. By becoming a registered organization, one gave up the right to act as he or she wished. Those that chose to operate as autonomous NGOs faced many challenges. ATFD and AFTURD²⁰ are two examples of such organizations.

¹⁶ Raja Boussedra, "Women After the Revolution," (lecture, SIT Study Abroad Center, Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia, October 16, 2015).

¹⁷ Charrad, *Family Law Reforms in the Arab World*, 5.

¹⁸ Luckham et al., *Democratic Institutions and Politics in Context of Inequality, Poverty and Conflict*, 30.

¹⁹ Najla Abbes, interview with author, Sidi Bou Said, November 15, 2015.

²⁰ Association of Tunisian Woman for Research and Development.

ATFD was established in 1989 and advocated for a range of women's issues with four focus areas, equality in laws between men and women, violence against women, democracy and liberty in Tunisia and the feminization of poverty.²¹ The women in ATFD were committed to their goals, yet they faced many challenges, especially in issues relating to their work to further advance democracy and liberty in Tunisia.²² The regime made every attempt to silence their voices.

For example, there was a time when a group of women were driving to Gafsa to meet with other activists. They were waiting in a line of traffic with many other cars, yet theirs was the only car not permitted to pass.²³ Still, incidents such as these did not prevent the women from communicating with one another across the regions. The ATFD used multiple UN mechanisms and relied on international solidarity in order to advance their objectives.

On some occasions, ATFD worked with UNFT in order to better accomplish their goals. The two organizations had different missions, but ATFD needed the support of UNFT because they were limited in what they could do as an autonomous organization.

Occasionally ATFD would partner with UNFT women working at shelters for battered women. Yet the ATFD had to exert significant effort to protect the women who arrived at the shelter since the UNFT had a different idea of what it meant for the women to be safe. Even if a woman was repeatedly beaten by her husband, UNFT workers would keep the family together. This demonstrates that UNFT was used as an arm of the state. They appeared when Bourguiba or Ben Ali needed to appear progressive in order to appease the Tunisian people or the international community.

Although women's legal rights were nearly equal to those of men, nothing had changed in society. If a woman went to a judge to divorce her husband, the judge would ask

²¹ Ahlem Belhad, interview, November 25, 2015.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

why the woman wanted to break-up a family. If a woman went to a doctor because she was raped by her husband and asked for a certificate to prove she was raped, the doctor would ask why she wanted to break-up a family.²⁴ Today, women are still facing these issues. Society continues to see women's role as being in the household. Luckily, after the revolution many civil society organizations were created that are trying to combat these mentalities.

Forming a Democracy

Protests in the Mining Basin

Today, many men and women in Tunisia associate feminism and women's rights with the old regime of Ben Ali. For this reason, it has been challenging for civil society groups promoting women's equality following the revolution. Feminism never had a chance to take root in Tunisian society, yet the women involved in these civil society organizations are fighting hard to change this. In reality it was women who first began to challenge the regime of Ben Ali back in the early 2000s. Through their efforts they are advancing the democracy of Tunisia and are setting an example for other Arab countries. Indeed, women led throughout the revolution, starting even before the revolution with protests in the mining basin in 2008.

Although 2011 was the year Ben Ali was ousted, unrest presented itself many years before. Protests occurred in the central region of Tunisia known as the Gafsa Mining Basin, occurring almost every two years beginning in 2002, with the largest taking place in 2008.²⁵ Protests started on January 5th in the town of Redeyef.²⁶ These protests were in response to the fact that only those who were connected to Ben Ali were able to find jobs with the Gafsa Phosphate Company (GPC). On January 5th a recruitment competition for the GPC was held

²⁴ Ahlem Belhad, interview, November 25, 2015.

²⁵ Laryssa Chomiak, "The Makings of a Revolution," (lecture, SIT Study Abroad Center, Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia, September 10, 2015).

²⁶ Eric Gobe, *The Gafsa Mining Basin Between Riots and a Social Movement: Meaning and Significance of a Protest Movement in Ben Ali's Tunisia*, Working paper. 2010. 1.

and very few locals were hired.²⁷ People were depressed by the high level of unemployment and frustrated by the lack of change. Additionally, protests occurred due to concerns over lack of safety in the mines.²⁸

The GPC is a public business and largest employer in the mining basin. The economy in the area has yet to be diversified and many locals have no choice but to rely on the GPC for jobs. However, the unemployment rate in Redeyef and other nearby towns was higher than the national average in 2008. While the national average was 14.1%, in Redeyef it was 26.7%.²⁹

These frustrations culminated on January 5th, following the recruitment competition. On that day, a group of women staged a sit-in with their sons. The protest turned violent as police opened fire into the crowd. Nevertheless, the women who were present that day would not be silent. On April 7th, in the town of Moularès, protests broke out once more over the official hiring of a number of winners of the contest. Tunisian youth, along with their mothers, organized sit-ins in various strategic locations. Several demonstrators blocked the main roads, preventing the operation of the phosphate washing plants, and some erected tents along the railroads to prevent the trains carrying phosphate from passing. The police struggled to contain the sit-ins and were eventually overcome by the crowds.

A similar event took place a few days later on April 9th, in the town of Mu`tamadiyya. Women staged a sit-in, protesting the release of those who had been arrested. Many unemployed and trade unionists, backed by delegations from the sections of the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH) from Kairouan, Monastir and Jendouba, also joined them.

²⁷ Gobe, *The Gafsa Mining Basin*, 6-7.

²⁸ Ahlem Ben Ahmed, "I Had Rights I Wasn't Aware of, I Had Things I Wanted to Achieve and I Didn't Know How," YouTube video, posted by "Oxfam in the Middle East," October 13, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97xNWUafNqI&feature=youtu.be>.

²⁹ Gobe, *The Gafsa Mining Basin*, 5.

One woman in particular, Ghazala Mhamdi, decided she had had enough. Growing up in the mining basin she knew the frustration people felt and fought against them. She was dismayed at how “the rich got richer and the poor remained poor.”³⁰ In 2005 she founded the Union for the Unemployed in Gafsa. Her goal was to represent those who were struggling. Speaking out was not easy and she was beaten by the police for her efforts and even had her mouth and knee broken.

During the months in which the protests occurred, many women were involved. Mhamdi herself took part in hunger strikes and fasted for 19 days. Though the situation did not drastically improve after the wave of protests, Mhamdi’s involvement in the protests inspired her to do more. She decided to run for parliament in the October 26, 2014 elections.

Mhamdi describes herself as a strong feminist and was shocked when she heard Ennahda, the Islamist party, had won. According to her “Ennahda has a retrograde view when it comes to women. The shock was that after removing a dictator like Ben Ali women would go backwards 50 years.”³¹ The party Mhamdi created was called “Keeping the Promise” and was an independent party. It was her hope to represent the unemployed. She competed with 57 men and her party was unable to win any seats in the new government. But her fight is not over. Though her party won no seats, women managed to gain over 30% of the seats in parliament.

Before Mhamdi was able to run for elections, the real revolution had to take place. Ben Ali had managed to crack down on the 2008 protests in Mhamdi’s hometown, but they returned in 2010 and he could not stop them this time. What had started as an economic revolution in the mining regions with the slogan “Dignity and Social Justice” spread to the

³⁰ “Tunisia: Keeping the Promise,” in *Trials of Spring*, directed by Mona Eldaief, (2015; New York: New York Times, 2015) DVD.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1:54.

coastal cities, where two more words were added, “Liberty and Democracy.”³² The people wanted freedom. Both men and women demanded it.

Gaining Parity

It was dusk on January 14 as thousands gathered on Avenue Bourguiba outside the ministry of interior, chanting for Ben Ali to leave. Later that night Tunisians rejoiced as they discovered Ben Ali had indeed fled to Saudi Arabia.³³ Tunisians were unsure what would follow but began to exercise their new freedoms by forming coalition groups and civil society organizations.

It was then that women realized how fragile their rights truly were. The institutions that were in place for women to have access to equal rights existed long before a democracy was formed, but what happened when the institution that created those rights disappeared? As Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, Tunisians rejoiced that their repressive government had come to an end, yet no one knew what was next. Tunisians of all ages and from all backgrounds began to question their identity.³⁴ Tunisian women were no exception to this and found that they had to fight for the rights they were historically given.

With the fall of the Ben Ali regime came new freedoms that had not previously existed. People were suddenly free to openly criticize the government and gather in large groups. Hence, Tunisian civil society began to flourish. Women constituted a large majority of those joining civil society organizations (CSOs). They sought to fill the gap between the progressive ideas of the past and the forward thinking ideas created during the revolution by ensuring these laws and ideas were applied in society.

³² Mounir Khélifa, “Tunisian Revolution II: First Democratic Transition,” September 9, 2015.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Najla Abbes, “League of Tunisian Women Voters,” (lecture, SIT Study Abroad Center, Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia, October 21, 2015).

Tunisian women believed they were ahead in the Arab world. Yet following the revolution, women had to struggle to maintain the rights they were historically given. The progressive policies enacted by Bourguiba and Ben Ali had not been enough to transform the mentality of the society. One example of this occurred during the creation of the new constitution when the Ennahda Party³⁵ attempted to include the clause “complimentary roles for men and women.”³⁶ As word of this spread, many women, as well as men, gathered on Bourguiba Avenue in downtown Tunis to protest on August 12, 2012, also known as Tunisian Women’s Day.³⁷ The government realized the majority of the population did not welcome this clause in the constitution and the voices of the women were heard.

As Tunisians decided how they wanted to move forward, many different voices clamored for attention. Women continued to use their newly acquired freedom of speech to voice their demands and concerns. The greatest example of this was the parity law. Women succeeded in proposing and passing this law which states that the electoral lists each party generates must alternate between men and women while lists that fail to respect this will be cancelled.³⁸

The parity law was initiated by civil society organizations. Many women’s associations were involved, whether by protesting in front of the parliament, campaigning on social media, or using their connections to members in the assembly.³⁹ Women understood the importance of gaining political representation. Both men and women were new to the political scene and while some men and even women argued that women were incapable of leading a party, men did not have much practice at this either. Both groups were learning how

³⁵ The Ennahda Party is the Islamist party in Tunisia which currently has the majority of seats in parliament, following November 9th, 2015 when 33 members of Nidaa Tounes, which had the majority left parliament. (This information was heard on the radio in Tunisia by the author on November 9th, 2015).

³⁶ Mounir Khélifa, “Tunisian Revolution II: First Democratic Transition,” September 9, 2015.

³⁷ Raja Boussedra, “Women After the Revolution,” October 16, 2015.

³⁸ Najla Abbes, *Tunisian Women: Political Role, Gains and Challenges (The Case of Parity)* 227

³⁹ Omezzine Khélifa, interview with author, Gammarth, November 15, 2015.

to be part of a democracy. Having a law in place that guaranteed a place for women at the political table was understood to be very important for “systems cannot promote women candidates in male-dominated parties without an explicit commitment, usually underlined by clear quotas, to fronting women candidates.”⁴⁰

One of the women I interviewed was heavily involved in the creation of the parity law and later became a member of a political party. Omezzine Khelifa wrote a petition in favor of parity that circulated online and reached 900 signatures in less than three days. She presented the petition to two party leaders and was told by both members that it was likely to pass. Nevertheless she continued to campaign by contacting media sources and members of parliament she knew.

She received a reply from Hafidha Chekir, a founding member of ATFD, asking her which kind of system she was pushing for. Khelifa presented two ideas. One was a couple system. Instead of voting for one person, each citizen must vote for two people, one man and one woman. The second system was the system of parity. When Khelifa was asked why she presented these two ideas as opposed to a quota system, as is used in many countries, she explained her choice as follows,

If you have a quota the minimum should be 35% in order to have visibility as a minority group, but when I realized that we would be seen as a minority group, I said come on, we are more than half of the population. If we ask for less we will have less for sure and people will see it as a maximum and not as a minimum.⁴¹

Three members of parliament petitioned for the new law, while women’s organizations used their connections to gain support for the idea as well. In the end a committee that included Hafidha Chekir wrote the electoral law.

⁴⁰ Luckham et al., *Democratic Institutions and Politics in Context of Inequality, Poverty and Conflict*, 31.

⁴¹ Omezzine Khelifa, interview, November 23, 2015.

The law passed and thanks to its provisions, Tunisia saw 5502 women candidates running for the National Constituent Assembly elections out of 10000 candidates.⁴² Yet, participation of women in the first democratic elections after the revolution was lower than what feminists had hoped.⁴³ Only 128 out of 1218 lists were headed by women, and of these, 85 were party lists while 43 were independent candidates. There was not a single list headed by a woman in the constituencies of Jendouba, Kairouan, Sidi Bouzid, or Kébili. Overall just 7% of the electoral lists were headed by women.⁴⁴ Only the Democratic Modernist Pole (PDM) applied parity at the heads of lists with 16 women at the head of its 33 lists. The Ettakatol party had four lists headed by woman among its 33. The Congress for the Republic (CPR), had one women at the top out of its 33 lists, while the Democratic Progressive Party presented three women at the top of its lists.⁴⁵

Despite these figures, the fact that Tunisian women and men were able to successfully lobby for this law indicates Tunisia is on the right track in terms of gender equality and hence democracy. However, they still have far to go. “In political society, one arena which remains stubbornly resistant to women’s participation are political parties.”⁴⁶ Having the parity law is one step forward, yet many women in politics constitute the base of the party and are unable to gain decision-making positions. That is why the work of organizations such as LET and Aswat Nissa are so important, as will be discussed later. Women’s issues will not be raised in politics unless women are able to access decision making positions. Tunisia is still working to shift from state feminism to political feminism and many civil society organizations are endeavoring to make this happen.

⁴² Abbas, “Tunisian Women,” 227.

⁴³ Ibid., 228.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Luckham et al., *Democratic Institutions and Politics in Context of Inequality, Poverty and Conflict*, 31.

The Role of the Quartet

Civil society organizations exploded after the revolution. The fact that women govern many of these organizations makes sense after one examines the role of the Quartet in the revolution.⁴⁷ The Quartet was composed of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers. As is evidenced by being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize earlier this year, the Quartet played a very substantial role in the revolution and set a precedent for Tunisians to join together to discuss the future of their country.⁴⁸

The UGTT was the organization that initially proposed the idea for the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which was envisioned as a way to speed the constitution drafting and the democratic transition as a whole. The UGTT is a very well respected organization among activists.⁴⁹ While the organization lacks women in leadership positions, they form a strong base for the organization. Women were the main mobilizers and put great pressure on Tunisian civil society to take action.

Thus it was women and the organizations in which they participated, from campaigning for the parity law to their involvement in the Quartet that established the precedent for civil society organizations to grow after the revolution.

Building a Strong Civil Society

Civil Society Redefined

Many things have changed in Tunisia since the revolution that occurred nearly five years ago. Some would even argue that the revolution continues today as Tunisians are still struggling to form their democracy. Democratic transitions are usually followed by “public

⁴⁷ Raja Boussedra, “Women After the Revolution,” October 16, 2015.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Turkiya Echebi, interview with author, translated by Najla Rajhi, Ariana, November 17, 2015.

skepticism, even apathy, expressed in low voter turn-out, declining membership in political parties and pervasive distrust of politicians.”⁵⁰ People expect immediate changes and become frustrated when this does not transpire. People demand things the government is unable to provide because they go beyond the systems that are currently in place.⁵¹

Tunisia’s economy has fallen since the revolution according to the World Bank, the unemployment rate hovers around 30%. People expected Nidaa Tounes, the secular moderate party, to improve the situation, stabilize the economy and help to rebuild a stronger Tunisia. However, many people feel betrayed by the alliance between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha that was formed in 2014.

Another problem is youth have become disenfranchised with the current situation in Tunisia, despite their involvement during the revolution. Many youth are now choosing to emigrate to other countries where they believe they have better job prospects and more opportunities. In extreme cases, some youth are even turning to terrorist activities.⁵² Youth disinterest has now spread to public disinterest. All across the country people are frustrated with the lack of progress they see in the government.

However, not everyone is discouraged. Since the fall of the Ben Ali regime, many civil society organizations have sprouted up all over the country. In order for a democracy to be successful, it is not enough to have democratic institutions from above, rather, you need both grassroots and top-down initiatives.⁵³ Without the presence of a strong civil society, the only tools that exist to transform society are top-down policies instituted by the state. An example of this is the system of state feminism created by Bourguiba and continued by his successor Ben Ali. Without a democratic state in which civil society could operate, women’s

⁵⁰ Luckham et al., *Democratic Institutions and Politics in Context of Inequality, Poverty and Conflict*, 5.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Hafedh Chekir, “Youth in Tunisia”(lecture, SIT Study Abroad Center, Sidi Bou Said, Tunisia, October 7, 2015).

⁵³ Luckham et al., *Democratic Institutions and Politics in Context of Inequality, Poverty and Conflict*, 12.

rights advanced only legally, but the mentality of society remained stagnant. A democracy is needed in order to create a democratic civil society, and only a democratic civil society can sustain a democratic state. Hence without civil society, democracies cannot evolve.⁵⁴

As a country becomes more democratic, civil society becomes stronger. This could not be more true in Tunisia where thousands of NGOs were created after the revolution to tackle various social and political issues and more continue to be established as time goes on. Following the democratic transition and the first parliamentary elections in 2011, these organizations encouraged people to get in touch with decision makers and become aware of their own power. This is what LET is doing in small rural areas in Tunisia. Civil society is what led to the successful creation and passing of the parity law and the creation of a strong constitution. Without the involvement of civil society, the situation in Tunisia today would be very different.

During my time in Tunisia I have had the opportunity to visit many of these organizations and hear from the founders about their mission and goals. These groups see the revolution as a new start and are doing what they can to uphold the articles of the new constitution through civil society. Many of these organizations employ a large number of women and many have women in leadership positions or are even run entirely by women. This is evidence that Tunisian women are turning to civil society organizations as a way to become more engaged with society after the revolution.

As Tunisia continues to transition into a democracy, it is imperative that women are involved in building this new democracy. For women to be involved in this process, they need to have a voice in government. The two civil society organizations I chose to focus on train women in political parties so they can access decision making positions within their parties, an important part of building a stronger democracy in Tunisia.

⁵⁴ Luckham et al., *Democratic Institutions and Politics in Context of Inequality, Poverty and Conflict*, 2.

Thus far, I have mentioned two events in which women helped shape and possibly change the future of Tunisia. The first was the passing of the parity law and the second was the call for a National Dialogue Conference initiated by the Quartet. Now I will discuss two civil society organizations run by women and their impact on Tunisian society.

Aswat Nissa Profile

One such organization is Aswat Nissa. This organization started in 2011 as a campaign to raise awareness about violence against women, but as they saw the needs of the country changing, they revised the goal of their organization. Currently they provide political training to women in political parties.

The idea to start the organization arose during the revolution. The members of Aswat Nissa observed many women leading the protests and wanted to continue to see women leaders following the revolution. Their hope is that after the training sessions, women are equipped with the skills and the confidence to access decision making positions within their parties.⁵⁵ In addition to training women in politics, Aswat Nissa also worked to raise awareness during the elections in 2011 and 2014 by educating women in rural areas and the suburbs of Tunis. They encouraged women to use their power to vote and make their demands known.⁵⁶

Aswat Nissa is a small organization with only three employees. The woman I interviewed, Magda El Haitem, is the project manager. El Haitem was born and raised in France. While pursuing a master's degree in international law, she came to Tunisia in order to complete her thesis and never left. She sees civil society as playing a major role in the new Tunisia saying, "here civil society has a lot of power and if you want to change things, that is

⁵⁵ Magda El Haitem, interview with author, Tunis, November 10, 2015.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

the way. They have a big place in Tunisia so it's interesting to work in the field and be involved in those kinds of things."⁵⁷

At the beginning of this project, Aswat Nissa had to make the decision whether to work with women who were currently in political parties. Although they would welcome the opportunity to be able to work with other women, they realize the need to "focus and choose a target because we are small and we cannot do everything."⁵⁸ The leaders of the organization feel that given the political situation of Tunisia today, women who are already in a party have more chances of gaining responsibilities. For now, Aswat Nissa's goal is "to focus on those women but also to show to other women who are not in parties that you can access those responsibilities and be elected if also you are engaged in a party."⁵⁹ They see it as simultaneously raising awareness while training woman in parties.

Aswat Nissa holds twelve training sessions a year. They focus on three themes and within each theme there are four trainings, each taking place over the course of one weekend. The first theme this year centered on "leadership and communication" and was mainly attended by woman heading the communication commissions in their parties.

The second theme focuses on "public politics" and centers on advocacy. Subjects such as gender based budgets and Tunisian laws are discussed. The third theme, "electoral campaigns," centers on campaign strategies. Attendees create a campaign plan for themselves to follow within their party as they run for office. The trainings take place either one weekend after another or sometimes every two weeks, but they are always held close together.

In order to narrow down the women who attend the training, Aswat Nissa receives five recommendations from each party. Since Aswat Nissa can only accommodate twenty women at each session, candidates are carefully selected, ensuring an equal quota from all

⁵⁷ Magda El Haitem, interview, November 10, 2015.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

parties. Aswat Nissa strives to maintain a positive relationship with the parties, as their ability to work in co-operation with the parties is essential to them.

Weeks of planning precede each session, though Aswat Nissa has become more efficient with each session. They begin by contacting the parties and experts at least two or three weeks in advance. They always use local experts from a variety of backgrounds, depending on the topic. They once brought in a coach to train women in public speaking. Additionally, they have a variety of lawyers they utilize. El Haitem relayed to me that for the next session they hope to employ an expert on gender-based rights.

In speaking with women who have undergone the training, they appreciate the fact that Aswat Nissa uses Tunisian experts, instead of international experts. As Khélifa said during her interview, she felt the lawyer who Aswat Nissa used during her the training session she attended was very knowledgeable about the Tunisian laws, but also knew the local culture. She taught the women how to challenge their own culture and heritage through law, and she was able to do this in part because she herself is Tunisian.⁶⁰

All trainings take place in Tunis, which is an obstacle for some women. Not only do some candidates have to travel seven hours to reach the capital, it can be difficult for women to have leisure time for four weekends in three months, especially if a woman has a family and children. Last year's attendees were a bit older, and many of them had children. This factor lowered the attendance rate. Aswat Nissa has seen the effects this can have as attendance has been almost 100% for these sessions since the candidates are younger and only one woman has children. In order to combat this fact, Aswat Nissa plans to hold trainings in the regions outside Tunis once they have the capacity to do so.

Aswat Nissa focuses on training women aged 18-35 as they want to encourage and support youth who are trying to be part of the new government. By addressing the

⁶⁰ Omezzine Khélifa, interview, November 23, 2015.

marginalization of young women in politics, Aswat Nissa hopes to prevent these youth from becoming disengaged with society. Their support of these youth is very valuable as it can deter them from joining extremist groups or emigrating to other countries. Having younger voices in politics is also important since, similar to having women in politics; if no youth are in the new government they cannot shape the country's future through policies. In turn, Aswat Nissa hopes this will improve young women's engagement with their own communities.

El Haitem does not see this focus changing anytime soon. The current program in place by Aswat Nissa is after evaluating all the programs and taking the best parts from each. The leaders have come to realize that "focusing on young women is important and I think we are the only ones to do that so I think we have to stay in our fields."⁶¹

The women who attend the trainings come from all different political parties and Aswat Nissa strives to work with all parties equally. When asked if they had been criticized for this they replied, "It's crazy, but no. This is the thing about working with everyone. If someone criticizes you, you say, 'why do you criticize me because I also work with those people?' So being inclusive is a good thing."⁶² This sets them apart from other organizations, such as LET who chose not work will all parties.

The founder of Aswat Nissa, Ikram Ben Said, was very keen on this. In an interview with the Global Observatory she stated that she believes Tunisian civil societies need to be more inclusive, "Many marginalized youth will continue down one of two paths: crossing the Mediterranean to Italy or joining the so-called Islamic State."⁶³ According to Said, many people struggled to feel included during the revolution, saying, "They cannot see themselves

⁶¹ Magda El Haitem, interview, November 10, 2015.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Williams, Margaret, *Inclusiveness the Key to Keeping Tunisia's Peace: Q & A with Ikram Ben Said*, The Global Observatory, October 7, 2015. <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/10/tunisia-aswat-nissa-isis-mediterranean/>.

in political parties, they cannot see themselves in people who are actually active in civil society. Civil society groups need to work on building inclusion and creating economic opportunities.”⁶⁴ Civil society in Tunisia is working to bridge many gaps in society. These groups in particular are working to merge the political process with average citizens.

This has not been an easy task. Aswat Nissa has worked very hard to form stable relationships with political parties. Now, four years later, the parties trust them and realize the importance of the program. This gives them leverage they would not otherwise have.

Nonetheless, having strong relationships with the parties does not solve everything. Although they are welcome inside the party, they cannot change the internal structure. It is the role of the party to create a space for more women to be in leadership positions. “We are not the party and we cannot ask them to give women more responsibilities.”⁶⁵ Their goal is to equip the candidates with the tools they need to succeed. Indeed, they cited that “the candidates are more confident after the training and can do more things, so that is part of our strategy.”⁶⁶

There are several factors preventing women from being able to fully participate in politics. One of the biggest obstacles is that it is impossible for women to participate in every decision because they cannot always attend the meetings. Many meetings are held at night in coffee shops and for women who live in rural areas, it is not possible for them to attend. As El Haitem described,

Even when you are a woman if you want to be part of it and be in the middle of the mixing and everything, the important ones [meetings] are the head of the parties who are mostly men. There are some women and especially in a regional commission of the parties they are mostly men. When you have the regional commission heading a meeting even at 8pm in a coffee shop where no women are present you can be as motivated as you want but you can't go to the meeting.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Williams, *Inclusiveness the Key to Keeping Tunisia's Peace*, October 7, 2015, <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/10/tunisia-aswat-nissa-isis-mediterranean/>.

⁶⁵ Magda El Haitem, interview, November 10, 2015.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Magda El Haitem, interview, November 10, 2015.

Khelifa also had something to say on the matter. When Khelifa reflected on her time in government she noted the same problem, stating that women are always excluded from negotiations. For the most important meetings, even women who held decision-making positions were excluded.⁶⁸ “In the end the historical leadership of the party decided.”⁶⁹ She explained this partially by explaining the ease with which one can ruin a woman’s reputation.

Women usually don’t like to be criticized openly...we are in a very conservative society so if anyone would like to destroy the reputation of a woman it is very easy. You could say she goes to meetings very late at night and she stays with men wherever it is. Especially for interior regions, it is not really allowed.⁷⁰

Additionally, there were even cases when women were not informed about the meetings because they live in rural areas and are only involved at the local level so men deliberately withhold information.

Family obligations can also prevent women from fully participating in politics. Women cannot bring their children to meetings. For this problem, Aswat Nissa hopes to institutionalize the academy. This would normalize women’s participation in politics and create a safe space for women to gather. This space would serve as a place for women to hold meetings and would also include a space for children. “I think that is how we can change things because when the women are in the safe space they can think of the future.”⁷¹ Khélifa has her own ideas about how to alter the current challenges facing women saying, “Mechanisms need to be found to overcome these problems. For example, having men’s participation to accompany them for security.”⁷²

Regardless of the ways women envision challenging the patriarchal system in Tunisia, organizations like these are pushing Tunisian society forward and will continue to do so.

⁶⁸ Omezzine Khélifa, interview, November 23, 2015.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Magda El Haitem, interview, November 10, 2015.

⁷² Omezzine Khélifa, interview, November 23, 2015.

Aswat Nissa is in the midst of planning something for the upcoming municipal elections, although since it is far in the future nothing is concrete as of yet. Due to a new law, however, that was instituted regarding parity, women now have a greater opportunity to win. The new law states that in addition to vertical parity, the lists for municipal elections also must include horizontal parity. This would greatly increase the chances of women heading lists and could enable women to achieve a real political gain in the municipal elections.

League of Tunisian Women Voters Profile

Another organization with similar goals is the Tunisian League of Women Voters. In addition to training women for political parties they also monitor elections and work with a program called AMAL, although their original goal was to support the parity law. Once again we see these organizations changing their goals to best tackle the current issues at hand. LET is a bit larger than Aswat Nissa and has grown over the years from having 60 election observers in 2011 to 400 in 2014.

Additionally, they are connected to a large network of women's associations throughout Tunisia and although they are based in the capital, they have offices in Jendouba, Kelibia and have plans to open a new office in Djerba. They were also involved in drafting the new constitution and reviewed several drafts to assess whether or not they respected women's rights in regards to international conventions.

Before the organization came into being, one of the co-founders, Najla Abbes, had never even heard of the parity law. She recounted the story to me about when she and the current president of LET, Bisma Soudani first heard the law had passed. The pair were on their way to work and Soudani turned to Abbes and said, "Congratulations Najla, we have the parity law." Abbes did not know what she meant. Once Soudani explained the law, Abbes asked herself, "Are we ready for that? Are we ready to be equally represented to men? Are

we ready to compete with them for political positions, for decision making positions?”

Soudani replied yes, since while it is true that women are learning politics for the first time, so are men. Prior to the revolution both men and women were neglected from the political scene as all political figures and key actors were nominated by the president.

Abbes herself was not politically active before the revolution. She was concerned with only her work, school and her family. After the revolution she began to change her mind. As did another young woman I interviewed from LET. The revolution inspired these women to become active citizens.

We were re-thinking identity itself, including women's status, image of women, her rights, her duties... That's when I realized that everything is being re-thought, everything is being re-constructed and if we stay passive, my rights that I take for granted now can be threatened and even just cancelled simply because I was viewed as enjoying rights that were granted to me by the old regime. Since the old regime is gone my rights can go too.⁷³

She and Soudani debated what they could do to contribute to their country. They considered starting everything from a think tank to their own political party. They experimented to see what suited them best.

They participated in humanitarian caravans traveling to disadvantaged areas that were neglected by the uprising. They attended several initial party meetings, always keeping an open mind and thinking about what they needed in order to be able to work on the issue of women's equality.

After several months they began what they referred to as “a thinking group”- young men and women who were curious about the state of their country and wanted to learn more. They invited key people from the political scene, civil society, and from the Independent Higher Authority of Elections (ISIE). They asked questions and discussed together in order to understand the shape that Tunisia was taking at that time.

⁷³ Najla Abbes, interview, November 15, 2015.

After discussing their options they decided to establish an association with people they had met through meetings, humanitarian caravans and other activities in which they had been involved. The association would focus on preparing women to participate effectively in the political and public life. That was the mission they conceived at the beginning.

They connected with eight women they had met over the past few months, including an administrative judge they had met in one of the humanitarian caravans, a journalist and a psychologist, to name a few. All of the women had diverse backgrounds and brought their own knowledge to the group. Abbas' aunt was an attorney and assisted the organization with writing their by-laws and allowed the group to meet in her office.

The next step was to decide on a name. They brainstormed many ideas but in the end settled on the Ligue des Electrices Tunisiennes (League of Tunisian Women Voters). They had an American friend who informed them that there was a League of Women Voters in the U.S. and the executive director, Zaida Arguedas, was scheduled to visit Tunisia soon. Their friend helped them arrange a meeting with her. Many civil societies in Tunisia did not know how to begin their work. LET was no different. "We were all new in civil society work so we wanted to know how it worked or the best practices and her recommendation of where to start." Through their meeting with Arguedas, they gained many insights. One example is that Arguedas introduced the slogan "take a friend to vote," which her organization had used for elections. LET decided to do the same.

Launching the organization was a challenge. They lacked funds and could not even afford an office. As time passed, they began to connect with various international organizations. Through these organizations they applied for grants and found a sustainable income for the organization.

They began their work by training people on observing elections to guarantee they were fair and transparent. They also observed woman voters. For instance, did women leave

the line, and if so was it to go feed their children or prepare lunch? Did they return? Was anyone trying to influence women's decisions? Did women come alone or were they accompanied by their husband, son or a male presence?

For the first elections they did not have a guide. Together with sociologists, gender experts, and legal experts, a manual for observing the election from a gender perspective was created. LET was the first organization to be certified by the Independent High Authority for the Elections (ISIE) and is the only organization that monitors the elections from a gender perspective.

LET views their approach as being holistic. Rather than focusing solely on training women as political actors, but also helping them become informed voters and engaged citizens. The training programs that LET provides are structured differently than those offered by Aswat Nissa. While LET still does conduct more traditional trainings sessions, they also have a mentorship program in which each candidate is paired with a "support assistant." These support assistants are young university graduates and many of them have master's degrees. Prior to working for LET many of these women were unemployed but now have the opportunity to use their degrees. These women help familiarize candidates with social media, prepare them for campaigns and support them in whatever aspect they may need.

This mentorship program helps to foster a connection between generations. While the support assistants are helping the candidates, the candidates also work to instill some of their ideas in the future of Tunisia. As one candidate said, "I hope I had some influence on her, at least when it comes to feminist thinking."⁷⁴

Part of a holistic approach involves working on all areas of women's empowerment.

AMAL is a joint effort with Oxfam in Tunisia, as well as Morocco, Yemen, and Palestine.

⁷⁴ Monia El Abed, *Let's Act: Women's Chronicles on Political Commitment*, directed by Annisa Daoud (Tunis: Artistes Producteurs Associés, 2015), DVD, 13:50.

Amal meaning “hope” in Arabic and the program seeks to “enable women from poor communities to strengthen their confidence, knowledge of their rights and their campaigning and advocacy skills.”⁷⁵ AMAL partners with programs in the four countries mentioned. In Tunisia, one of their partnership organizations is LET.

Through the AMAL program LET is empowering women in rural communities. One woman, Ahlem Ben Ahmed, had such a positive experience with AMAL that she is considering running in the upcoming municipal elections in her small village in northeastern Tunisia. The knowledge she gained from the program can be summed up in the following sentences, “I had rights that I wasn’t aware of, I had things that I wanted to achieve and I didn’t know how. We are ready to fight for our rights; we want our voices to be heard!”

Ben Ahmed never had a chance to attend school. Today the life of the thirty-two year old is consumed by caring for her two children, both of whom are asthmatic. Because of this, it is often difficult for her to leave her children alone. She worries especially about her son Ramzi, saying “We cannot predict when my son...might have a sudden attack.” While Ben Ahmed is at home with the children, her husband is off working in construction. The family struggles to get by with only one income.

The first time she had ever heard about AMAL and LET was when they came to her village. “They were the first to introduce the rural women in the community to our rights.”⁷⁶ The women in her community received training and were taught how to fight for their rights and to advocate for themselves. Now, Ben Ahmed is a leader in her village, teaching women

⁷⁵ “AMAL,” Oxfam, accessed November 15, 2015, <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/citizen-states/amal>.

⁷⁶ Ahlem Ben Ahmed, “I Had Right’s I Wasn’t Aware of, I Had Things I Wanted to Achieve and I Didn’t Know How,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97xNWUafNqI&feature=youtu.be>. 1:27.

about their rights just as LET taught her. “All women are entitled to basic human rights,”⁷⁷ she says. Her hope is that her children will grow up to have a better life than her.

In a way, the future of Tunisia rests in the hands of civil society. So far, they have been the ones pushing society forward and have made things happen. Yet they have a lot of work to do. People are still learning what it means to be a civil society group and how to organize. One thing is certain, a successful democratic transition depends on the full participation of women. Women need a seat at decision-making tables, for democracy requires the wisdom of diversity.⁷⁸

Conclusions

Analysis

Since 1956 and the creation of the CSP, Tunisian women have been granted rights unparalleled to their female counterparts in the MENA region. Yet the system of state feminism was not enough to truly emancipate women. In the 1980s and 90s, a new wave of women’s activism emerged in Tunisia with the creation of the ATFD and the struggle for gender equality moved forward, despite many obstacles faced under the repressive regime of Ben Ali.

However, it was not until after the revolution in 2011 that women were truly able to champion for their equality. Ironically, it was at this moment that the identity of women was questioned and they were faced with losing rights they had enjoyed for over 54 years. The thought of losing these rights propelled many women into action. As civil society in Tunisia grew, many women flocked to join these organizations and started associations of their own, contributing to the strength of civil society in Tunisia. But Tunisia still faces many challenges.

⁷⁷ Ben Ahmed, “I Had Right’s I Wasn’t Aware of,” 1:47.

⁷⁸ Ikram Ben Said, “No Ceilings Ikram Ben Said,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZ4PJEjPq7Q>.

After the revolution, Tunisia was met with many obstacles. Though in the end, the Tunisian people were able to form a new government through free and fair elections. Despite these successes, the country is still working to build its democracy. This paper has sought to evaluate this new democracy by examining the rights of women. After assessing the situation it is evident that certain actions need to be taken in order for women to reach full equality with men in Tunisian society.

First and foremost, the mentality of the society needs to change. Yet this is not something that can happen easily. Civil society organizations such as LET and Aswat Nissa are playing an important role in the future of Tunisia. By empowering women they are fighting to change the mentality of women in society. There is hope that this will inspire other men and women to realize the benefits of having a society in which every citizen is able to fully participate.

Secondly, civil society needs to be strengthened. While the concept of civil society is not new in Tunisia, the practice is. CSOs need to reach across borders and collaborate with one another. It is only by building a stronger civil society that Tunisia's democracy and Tunisian women can advance. Tunisian women in general need to be articulate of their role in civil society. Since the revolution, Tunisian women have marched, sat and protested alongside men in the street. Today, women hold leadership positions in civil society and mobilize communities, yet their efforts go unnoticed. As Ikram Ben Said said, "I think they are doing a great job, but I think that Tunisian women now should start thinking about how can they tell their stories and inspire other women and men. I think they are doing a great job, but they have to show up."⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Williams, *Inclusiveness the Key to Keeping Tunisia's Peace*, October 7, 2015, <http://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/10/tunisia-aswat-nissa-isis-mediterranean/>.

Women need to fight on the ground to change the political scene and to support and encourage more women to be involved in politics. While Awat Nissa and LET have different approaches, they both strive to challenge the status quo. They are committed to empowering women and fighting gender discrimination. Their work is helping to fill gaps in society that the government is not addressing. These gaps include creating jobs, reaching out to disenfranchised youth, ensuring that elections are being held fairly and training women for political office. The role of civil society is extremely important to uphold a democracy and keep the government accountable. These organizations are pushing the boundaries of gender equality and other issues to keep Tunisia moving forward.

Limitations

As with any study, there were certain obstacles to my research. My biggest obstacle was accessing women in politics to interview. The reasons for this vary. The first was finding women in the area. Many of the women trained by LET and Aswat Nissa live in various regions outside Tunis. I did not have the time nor the resources to travel to municipalities that were more than a few hours away. The second challenge was finding women who spoke English. Although I speak a moderate amount of Arabic and French, it is not enough to conduct an interview regarding women's political participation. My limited access to a translator further inhibited my ability to connect to a wide range of candidates.

Time was also another limiting factor. Since I had only one month to complete this project, I had to limit the number of civil society organizations I researched. Having more time would have allowed me to explore time other organizations besides LET and Aswat Nissa.

Suggestions for Further Study

Women are slowly gaining more political power in Tunisia. While my project addressed several organizations working to aid these women, as well as several factors working against this woman, more research is required. Examining organizations that are similar to Aswat Nissa and LET would be a valuable extension of this project. One could analyze their approaches to determine which were most effective.

Appendix

Interview Questions

Civil Society Leaders

1. What is your name, age and educational background? What town are you from?
2. When did you first start working for Aswat Nissa/League of Tunisian Women Voters?
3. How did you hear about/have the idea for Aswat Nissa/League of Tunisian Women Voters?
4. How did you come up with the name?
5. How many people were involved in the initial process of starting the organization versus how many people are involved today?
What are the age ranges of people in your organization? Of the women you train?
6. Would you like to have more people working for you or do you plan to expand in the future?
7. How many of your employees are volunteers and how many are full time?
8. Had your focus area changed in the past years?
9. How do you want to expand in the future? What are your current plans for expanding in the next two years?
10. What does your relationship with the political parties you work with look like? Have you encountered any obstacles in working with them?
11. How do you find the women you will train?
12. Do you maintain connections with women you have trained?
Where do trainings take place?
13. How many women have you trained so far?
14. Why did you decide to work for this organization instead of being in a party yourself?
15. Are you worried about funding for your organization? Where does your current funding come from?
How do you plan on creating revenue in the future?
16. What do you see as the biggest obstacles women in politics face?
17. What is your organization doing to specifically address these issues?
18. Have you encountered any backlash from the parties or other members of society for your work?
19. What problems have you encountered as a civil society organization in Tunisia?

Women in Politics

1. What is your name, age and educational background? What town are you from?
2. When did you first decide to join a political party?
3. Why did you decide to join the particular party you are in? What values attracted you to that party?
4. How many people are in your party? How many of them are women?
5. Do you have other employment right now besides working/volunteering with the party?
6. Were you interested in politics as a small child? If not, when did your interest in politics begin?
7. Did your family discuss politics when you were growing up?
8. When did you attend trainings with Aswat Nissa/LET?
9. How effective do you think the trainings were? What were some of the most valuable skills you learned?
10. What struggles have you had as a women in your party?

11. Did your party have any woman as leaders of a list? How many candidates on the list were woman?
affected your private life?
12. Do you feel the legacy of Bourguiba has been positive or negative?
13. Do you think the parity law has been affective?
14. How did women participate in the revolution and did you personally participate? How?
15. Do you feel women are being threatened in post-revolutionary Tunisia?
16. What will the biggest challenge be for women to create political space for themselves?
17. How are women currently represented in political and civil society? How do you think women can increase their presence in these areas?
18. What motivated you to run versus becoming involved in a civil society organization?
19. What do you hope for the future of Tunisia and the future of women in Tunisia?

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