



Narrowing the Gap Between Tunisia's Gender Laws and Women's Reality

Don Duncan | Friday, Nov. 4, 2016

When Tunisians overthrew dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, they kicked off a wave of popular uprisings throughout the Middle East and spurred a jubilant sense of unity at home. But for champions of women's rights in the country, that jubilation was soon replaced by a sense of dread over what might happen to those rights as Islamist conservatism began to take hold.

While Ben Ali's two decades in power were marked by corruption, human rights abuses and tight restrictions on free speech and political opposition, his regime did preserve the secular foundations of Tunisia's strong women's rights legislation, established in 1957 with the adoption of the Code of Personal Status. That code guaranteed women in Tunisia far more extensive rights than in most other Arab countries, including to initiate a divorce, open a bank account, and establish a business without spousal consent; and to access abortion services. It also outlawed polygamy.

Anxiety concerning the future of women's rights in Tunisia was laid to rest by the country's 2014 constitution, which solidly enshrined those rights and mandated gender parity on electoral lists. Today, women make up some 30 percent of the legislature, known as the Assembly of the Representatives of the People. Several parties are broaching the notion of a possible gender quota system for all levels of government and the civil service.

"Women must have a presence in political life and in the union sector," says Ishrok Rhouma, 27, one of the tens of thousands of Tunisian women who took to the streets of Tunis in the protests against Ben Ali's regime in late 2010. Rhouma, originally from the provincial city of Siliana, moved to Tunis for her studies and was on campus when the demonstrations broke out. With several university friends, she joined in.

"We shouted 'get out' and I was totally into it," she recounts over a juice at a cafe terrace on Avenue Habib Bourguiba, Tunis' central thoroughfare and the main site of the revolution. It was where Rhouma came in 2011 to protest.



A woman walks past graffiti in Sidi Bouzid, where the protests that lit the Arab world began, Tunisia, Oct. 19, 2011 (AP photo by Amine Landoulsi).

"I was a little scared," she says. "But when you see the street full with other protesters, you don't think about fear so much. Rather, you think that this is a dictator and that we must rip him out of Tunisia and create a more democratic country."

The experience changed Rhouma politically. She is now planning to run in the country's first municipal elections, expected next year. "We must always be watchful for all the possible problems that could arise," she adds.

Problems are already arising. Although women's rights have been shored up on the legislative level since the revolution, challenges facing women persist on the ground level. According to the Ministry of Women's and Family Affairs, violence against women is growing, climbing by 6 percent over the past four years. This year, a government report said that 53 percent of Tunisian women

(<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B9juKescTZSMZY1KejFZdzNjclU/view>) experience at least one physical attack in their lifetimes.

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Although Tunisian women graduate from university at a rate almost double that of their male counterparts, female unemployment currently stands at 26 percent, versus 16 percent for men, according to government statistics.

Women face major pay discrimination, especially in the agricultural sector, according to some advocacy groups. In March, the Tunisian Association for Cultural Action published a report (<http://atac.tn/2016/03/19/%d8%a3%d9%88%d9%84-%d8%af%d8%b1%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%a9-%d9%85%d9%8a%d8%af%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%aa%d9%83%d8%b4%d9%81-%d8%a7%d9%86%d8%aa%d9%87%d8%a7%d9%83%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%ad%d9%82%d9%88%d9%82-%d8%a7/>) stating that 99 percent of women working in the private agricultural sector do not receive equal pay as men for doing the same job.

Instead of addressing these problems, however, the male-dominated government insists it has more pressing issues to attend to, such as the sluggish economy, domestic terrorism and the stabilization of the country's new democracy. Tunisia has seen seven governments in just under six years.

"We have a whole range of [women's rights] laws, but in their implementation, they don't exist," says Naziha Labidi, recently appointed minister of women and family affairs. The new government was

formed after the last one was dissolved this summer, following a vote of no confidence. Labidi plans to institute a point person in each government ministry and civil service department with the job of ensuring that the equality and equal opportunities guaranteed for women by the constitution are seen through.

"My fight is to apply the laws that already exist," Labidi adds. "It makes no sense to take on new laws if they are not going to be implemented."

The biggest challenge facing women in Tunisia today lies in how to truly exercise the power that the country's progressive laws confer on them. One solution for women is to narrow the gap in experience and skills between women and men in politics.

"Aswat Nissa," which translates from Arabic as "women's voices," is an NGO founded just after the revolution that has developed once-a-month political training sessions for women who have entered, or are about to enter, political life. Women who attend the sessions, which last a year, learn how to communicate clearly and with conviction, research and read laws, draft gender-sensitive budgets, canvass, debate effectively, fundraise and mobilize volunteers.

The organization enrolled 40 women in its training program this year, all of whom are active in politics. Most of this year's training sessions are geared toward women like Rhouma, who are preparing to run for office for the first time, but it also focuses on women who are already in politics.

One of the program's trainees, Karima Taggaz, 33, debuted last month as an elected representative in the new session of the assembly.

"I have visited parliament before," she says one recent morning while walking around the legislature. "But when you're an assembly member, it's something else. You're part of this world."

As Taggaz moves from room to room around the assembly building, she holds herself confidently among her mostly male colleagues. Like them, she is in preparation mode. She is readying herself to make a substantive impact this session, for women.

"Women must dare to impose themselves in politics so as to take their rightful place," Taggaz says. "They can't wait for it to be done for them. No matter what their action is, every woman must have a personal conviction that she is able to do something to make things better."

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