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Women's rights: Tunisian Women in the Workplace

By Sangeeta Sinha¹

Abstract

Tunisia is unique among Arab nations, due to the fact that women have been granted equal rights by the Constitution. Tunisia obtained its independence from France in 1956. During the colonial period, women were marginalized, and they little access to education. Economic activity was largely confined to the household, while wearing of the veil was widespread. Since 1956 Tunisian women have made great strides toward achieving greater rights, but has it been enough. This study describes the current status of women in Tunisia given the changing socio-political scene. Have women's rights progressed or has they been hampered by cultural and religious forces in the region? The study finds that while women's rights have not regressed, women have not made much inroads in the workplace. Further analysis using structural conditions is needed to understand the status of women in Tunisia.

Keywords: Labor force participation, family law, women's rights

Introduction

On January 14, Friday, 2011, Tunisia's president of 23 years, General Zine el Abidine Ben Ali was forced to step down from his position as head of state. He was ousted out of office after weeks of anti-government protests and riots.

The National Public Radio news bulletin of January 27, also reported the following:

“Female voices rang out loud and clear during massive protests that brought down the authoritarian rule of Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Women in Tunisia are unique in the Arab world for enjoying near equality with men. And they are anxious to maintain their status. In Tunis, old ladies, young girls and women in black judges robes marched down the streets demanding that the dictator leave. Hardly anyone wears the Muslim headscarf in the capital, and women seem to be everywhere, taking part in everything, alongside men.”

This portrays an entirely different image of an Arab nation. An image that is contrary to the general belief that women are invisible, talking in low tones and subservient to men. Here we see women walking the streets, protesting for their citizenship rights. At the same time this is also the nation where the self-immolation of a young fruit seller, Mohammed Bouazizi, sparked the current spate of uprisings against authoritarian governments of Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and

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continues to spread to other nations across the Middle East. Contrast the image of women on the streets of Tunis to that of the fruit seller who self-immolated himself for economic reasons. Both images tell different stories, yet both are true images of a society that has undergone many changes in the last 50 years. Within a framework of social and economic turbulence, this paper attempts to understand the position of women in Tunisia.

Tunisian women have enjoyed a better legal and political position compared to their female counterparts in the region, by virtue of the 1956 reform of the Family Law. The purpose of this case study is to understand and describe the current position of Tunisian women in economy or the workforce given the fact that among the Arab states, this is the nation that has granted most economic and legal rights to women. Patriarchy and gender relations have had a negative effect on women's rights in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, but "globalization seems to be offering new constraints as well as enormous opportunities" (Moghadam 2007:2, Cabezas 2009).

Globalization has been referred to as the increasing interconnectedness of markets, states, communication and ideas. With the transfer of ideas and communication, interest in human rights has also increased – a marked difference from the era when human rights were secondary to states' claim to sovereignty. Human rights is also seen as "a set of claims and entitlements to human dignity, which has presumably been supplied by the state" (Brysk 2002). Thus women's rights have now become an integral part of the regime of human rights, and are of special importance to women of reduced means – who are subject to both class and gender violations, both within their own communities as well as outside (Brysk 2002). It is within this context that we find proponents of women's rights using the human rights language as a means of empowerment.

Globalization and Empowerment of Women

The argument that as ideas flow across borders—by creating an international set of norms for human rights—we should see an improvement in rights of women, especially women who form a large part of a nation's labor force. Most research on women's rights has contended that as women become economically independent they automatically gain the ability to make decisions about their lives, livelihoods and bodies. The argument that, empowerment of women also leads to nations becoming democratic and modern is an important aspect of women's rights. Thus the idea of empowerment includes social, cultural and economic aspects of rights. While each of these factors is linked, the most empowering is the ability to reach one's full potential through work. Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights enshrines this right for all: "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment." But women across most regions of the world have not yet been granted this right due to social, cultural or religious norms.

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, had urged for a global platform for action on gender equality and women's empowerment. The platform stressed on aspects of equality for women and men in the world of work (ILO: 2010). Under the section of "women and the economy", the following objectives were listed:

- Promote women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions and control over economic resources
- Facilitate women's equal access to resources, employment, markets and trade
- Provide business services, training and access to markets, information and technology, particularly to low-income women
- Strengthen women's economic capacity and commercial networks
- Eliminate occupational segregation and all forms of employment discrimination.
- Promote harmonization of work and family responsibilities for women and men. (ILO, 2010:ix)

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has also developed a framework for measuring women's empowerment, by defining it as a "process of achieving basic capabilities, legal rights, and participation in key social, economic, political, and cultural domains" (Moghadam 2007:3). According to Janet Giele (1977), in addressing women's empowerment, we should ask questions pertaining to political expression, work and mobility, family, education, health and cultural expression (in Moghadam 2007). This study will use some of these questions to understand women's position in Tunisia.

Overview of Women's Rights in Tunisia

Tunisia is unique among Arab nations, due to the fact that women have been granted equal rights by the Constitution. Tunisia obtained its independence from France in 1956. During the colonial period, women were marginalized, and there was little access to education. Economic activity was largely confined to the household. Wearing of the veil was widespread, and there was no female participation in public life. These conditions were interpreted as the expression of Islamic identity and Tunisian culture (Ben Salem 2010). As the struggle for independence intensified, women denounced their confinement, illiteracy, subservient position within the family, and imposed marriages. The first women's association, the Tunisian Women's Islamic Union, was created in 1936 (Marzouki 1993 in Zartman 1991). Women went on to participate in the fight for independence, and slowly affirmed their place in society. In 1956 President Habib Bourquiba who took over office after independence, passed the Personal Status Code, and gave full and equal rights to women. Habib Bourquiba wanted to lay the foundation for a modern Tunisia, with women contributing toward building of a new Tunisia. President Bourquiba believed that the country had to shed its traditional social and cultural norms to build a society based on education with rights for all its citizens. Despite the fact that Tunisia shares social and cultural norms with other Arab states we find that state intervention in the form of the Code for Personal Status gave Tunisian women full and equal rights in making decisions about marriage and in related spheres (Charrad 2001: Chekir 1996).

.....reformed marriage, divorce, custody, and to some extent, inheritance. On all of these dimensions, it expanded women's rights by eradicating some of the most patriarchal arrangements of the legislation previously in force. In

one of the boldest moves in the Arab-Islamic world, especially in 1956, it abolished polygamy. It radically transformed divorce by eliminating the husband's right to repudiate his wife and allowing women to file for divorce. It made divorce a matter for the courts. It gave women and men the same rights and obligations with respect to both initiating a divorce and paying its cost to the other party. It also established the principle of alimony and increased women's rights to child custody, while maintaining men's advantage through guardianship. (Charrad 2007: 1516).

Some studies consider the reforms in Tunisia as "top-down" since the Code for Personal Status of 1956 was enacted and enforced by the government as part of its effort to modernize. "It was the victory of a government strong enough to place a claim on Islam and enforce a reformist interpretation of the Islamic tradition" (Charrad 2001: 1516) Furthermore, as part of the top-down reform, women's rights received a further boost in 1993. In this second wave under President Ben Ali, Tunisian society witnessed a rise in women's activism. This liberal atmosphere helped further develop women's associations, and something very important as well.

The reform of 1993 made mother a source of *jus sanguinis* . For the first time a Tunisian woman could pass her nationality to a child born abroad, regardless of the nationality of the father (Charrad, 2007:1524).

This important legislation added to a woman's citizenship rights and her status within the family. According to Charrad (2001), while examining women's rights in developing nations, we should consider the fact that societies "where lineages and kin-based social formations remained central elements of the social structure and anchors for political power, as in Morocco and Algeria in the aftermath of colonial rule, the individual rights of women suffered. On the other hand, women's legal status improved where these kin-based social formations were weakened as in Tunisia" (Charrad, 2001:1523)

The euphoria of the 1980s and early 1990s continued when women's movements gained strength through international collaborations on gender equity (Moghadam 2007).The Beijing conference and the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) were some such arenas which helped advance political and legal rights for women. But, in an international arena which was dominated by market-led policies, and an emphasis on democracy and rights, these did little for nations with persistent poverty (Molyneux & Razawi 2002). The new economic policies failed to bring prosperity for most regions of the world, and the poorer nations paid a heavy social and economic cost as its citizens saw their incomes, wages and employment opportunities dwindle (Molyneux & Razawi 2002). Judging by the absence of growth in many nations, there has been little support for trade and financial liberalization policies (Weisbrot et al, 2000).

The new millennium entered its first years amidst the unraveling of peace accords, growing communal violence, environmental setbacks, and a global crisis occasioned by terrorism and war. If this was not enough to set back

human rights agendas, it had already become apparent that, despite the dynamism of the human rights movements, a wide gulf remained between the articulation of global principles and their application in many national settings. (Molyneux & Razai, 2002:3)

Given this scenario of economic hardship, the rise in authoritarian regimes, the clamoring by international human rights regimes for improvement in human rights, we see Tunisia at the center of these contradictory forces trying to balance the different forces.

Women’s rights in the Middle East and North Africa

According to Freedom House surveys, the rights of women in the Middle East and North Africa have been met with most resistance. Countries like Morocco passed a new family law in 2004, which have the potential for improving women’s rights, but have not been enforced. While most countries have passed legislation providing equal rights for women, “in no case are these guarantees effectively enforced by state authorities” (Freedom House 2010). Freedom House scores countries on five dimensions of political and economic rights. Country ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing the lowest and 5 the highest level of freedom women have to exercise their rights. These are:

- non-discrimination and access to justice
- autonomy, security, and freedom of the person
- economic rights and equal opportunity
- political rights and civic voice
- social and cultural rights

The first category is about women’s equality under the constitution, protection from gender based discrimination, citizenship rights, equality in the penal code and criminal laws, and women’s legal identity. The second category refers to family laws and equality within marriage, freedom of religion, freedom of movement, and freedom from gender-based violence. A glance at the country rating for Middle East and North Africa, reveals that Tunisia scored highest on all five dimensions (Table 1).

Table 1: Freedom House Country Ratings For Middle East and North Africa, 2010.

	Nondiscrimination And access to Justice	Autonomy, Security, and Freedom of the Person	Economic Rights and Equal Opportunity	Political Rights and Civic Voice	Social and Cultural Rights
Algeria	3.1	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Bahrain	2.2	2.6	3.1	2.3	2.9
Egypt	3.0	2.9	2.9	2.7	2.6
Iran	1.9	2.1	2.7	2.1	2.5
Iraq	2.7	1.9	2.6	2.6	2.3
Jordan	2.7	2.7	2.9	2.9	2.8
Kuwait	2.2	2.4	3.1	2.4	2.9

Lebanon	2.9	3.0	3.0	2.9	3.1
Libya	2.4	2.6	2.8	1.8	2.5
Morocco	3.1	3.2	2.8	3.1	2.9
Oman	2.1	2.1	2.9	1.8	2.5
Palestine	2.6	2.4	2.9	2.7	2.6
Qatar	2.1	2.3	2.9	1.8	2.5
Saudi Arabia	1.4	1.3	1.7	1.2	1.6
Syria	2.7	2.3	2.9	2.2	2.5
Tunisia	3.6	3.4	3.2	3.1	3.3
UAE	2.0	2.3	3.1	2.0	2.5
Yemen	1.9	1.9	1.9	2.0	2.0

Source: Sanja Kelly and Julia Breslin, ed., “Women’s Rights in the Middle East and North Africa” (New York, NY: Freedom House; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010) Accessed online at <http://www.freedomhouse.org> on 02/10/2011.

The third category of economic rights refers to the right to own property. Is a woman at the age of 18 able to open a bank account, take out a loan, and enter freely into business and financial contracts and transactions? In practice, women remain underrepresented in the workforce and face gender-based salary inequalities, according to the Freedom House report. Yet, comparing the progression of the rights Tunisia for 2004 and 2009 (Table 2), we notice changes that occurred in the categories of economic right and equal opportunity, and political rights and civic voice. These changes reflect political rights, since women have gained some seats in the parliament. As regards the social and cultural rights, Freedom House reports:

“Advances in public health policies and family planning have enabled women to strengthen their liberty. With a reasonably easy access to contraception, more women are able to limit family size and increase the intervals between births, allowing them to attain “autonomy of personal status” (Ben Salem 2010:21)

But inequality persists due to cultural practices, but a score of 3.3 indicates that women have made inroads in this sphere as well.

Table 2: Freedom House Country Rating for Tunisia

<i>Country Rating</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2009</i>
Nondiscrimination and Access to Justice	3.6	3.6
Autonomy, Security, and Freedom of the person	3.4	3.4
Economic Rights and Equal Opportunity	3.1	3.2
Political Rights and Civic Voice	2.8	3.1
Social and Cultural Rights:	3.3	3.3

The discussion above indicates that the Tunisian women are certainly ahead of women in the region, yet inequality persists in both rural and urban areas (though it is higher in rural areas). The report also adds that Ministry for Women, the Family, Childhood and the Elderly, and the National Board of Family affairs, and about 20 other organizations are actively working toward reducing this inequality. According the Freedom House Report (2010)

“Since the year 2000, very few new laws that favor women have been adopted. The bulk of the juridical corpus seems to be in place, and the remaining legal issues, such as inequality with regard to inheritance, have not prompted fresh reforms. Conflicts within the judiciary continue between those who—referring to the first article of the constitution, which states that the religion of Tunisian society is Islam—tend to support Islamic law, and those who favor application of substantive law, personal status code, and international conventions ratified by Tunisia. An oscillation persists between traditional values and a spirit of innovation as the tendency toward the principles of equality, nondiscrimination, and liberty continues to be in competition with the dominant conservative values” (2010).

The report also states that most women do have equal access to justice. Tunisia has had women in the judiciary and the state's executive-level commitment to women's rights for quite some time now. The first woman judge was appointed in 1968, and currently 27 percent of judges and 31 percent of lawyers are women. Men and women have equal right to work as established by the civil service and Article 5 of the 1993 labor code, which emphasizes the legislators' intent to "repeal all forms of work-related discrimination between the sexes." (Ben Salem, 2010:4). Legislation in itself has not helped overcome discrimination, due to the religious interpretations. The state has not accepted the international standards such as those found in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and established during the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women, the report added. This is after Tunisia signed CEDAW in 1980 and ratified it in 1985, but did not take any legislative action, since it was in conflict with the Constitution (which stated that Islam was a state religion).

Development and Women in Tunisia

In trying to understand the position of women in Tunisia, this study will compare economic and political indicators, using the framework provided by the Beijing conference. Indicators of female labor force participation, education, gender inequality, health and political participation will be used to understand the current status (subject to availability of data).

Tunisia's Gross Domestic Product per capita is \$ 8,509 (2008 PPP) (2008 PPP US\$). GDP is defined as the sum of value added by all resident producers in the economy plus any product taxes (fewer subsidies) not included in the valuation of output, calculated without making deductions for depreciation of fabricated capital assets or for depletion and degradation of natural resources (HDR 2010). Tunisia spends 10 percent of its GDP on agriculture, 34.6 percent on industry and 54.8 percent on services (CIA Fact

book 2010). Tunisia has a growing urban population – 67 percent live in urban areas. Its total labor force is 3.83 million (CIA Fact book 2010). With growing urbanization, 18.3 percent of the labor force is employed in the agriculture sector, 31.9 percent in industry, and 49.8 percent in the service sector, according 2009 estimates (CIA Fact book 2010). Of the total population of 10,429,000 million 3.8 percent live below the poverty line, that is 396,302 live on less than \$1.25 a day (HDR 2010).

The United Nations Human Development Report (2010) places Tunisia among nations with high human development, ranked at 81 out of 169 nations. Its neighbors, Libya is ranked at 53, Algeria is ranked at 84, Morocco is ranked at 114 and Egypt at 102. Since its independence in 1956, Tunisia has witnessed economic growth and development. According to the UN Human Development Report, 2010, Tunisia's Human Development Index has improved from 0.436 (1980) to 0.683 (2010). Libya's HDI in 2010 was 0.755, Algeria at 0.677 and Morocco at 0.567. The Human Development Index (HDI) is a composite index that measures a country's average achievements in three basic aspects of human development: health, education, and living standards. The index ranges from 0 (low human development) to 1 (high human development). The new measure was introduced as an alternative to economic measures of national development, such as level of income and the rate of economic growth (UNHDR, 2010).

The health component of the HDI is measured by life expectancy at birth component of the HDI. The education component of the HDI is measured by mean of years of schooling for adults aged 25 years and expected years of schooling for children of school going age. For women to enter into the work place, education is key to the changing status of women. Though it is a basic right, and an important aspect of citizenship rights, in many parts of Middle East, North Africa and South Asia women do not have access to education, thus widening differences between men and women (Moghadam 2007). Girls have been denied education due to reasons of poverty and are seen to be fulfilling their destiny of being married and bearing children. The literacy rate in Tunisia for women is 63.1 percent and 83.1 percent for men for 2009. The education index for Tunisia, according to 2010 HDR reports, was 0.509 in 2000, and 0.617 in 2010. These numbers again indicate an increase in the mean years of schooling and expected years of schooling for Tunisians, and overall increase in educational attainment of women.

The living standards component of HDI is measured by gross national income per capita. The HDI uses the logarithm of income, to reflect the diminishing importance of income with increasing Gross National Income (UNHDR 2010). The above discussion indicates that Tunisians have a better standard of living, and are better educated than their Arab neighbors. As the Human Development Report indicates, the Tunisian government has been at the forefront trying to improve the economic and social conditions of its citizens, especially women.

As economic and social conditions for women change, making it more acceptable for them to step out in the labor force, we should observe a corresponding rise in employment for women. This study next looks at women in the labor force. The study used data from the International Labour Organization (ILO), under the section, Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM), which has been published every two years since 1999. The KILM dataset is a collection of 20 key indicators of the labor market, ranging from employment and variables relating to employment (status, sector, hours, etc.) to

education, wages and compensation costs, labor productivity and working poverty. In this paper, indicators for labor force participation and unemployment are examined for two time points.

The International Labor Organization defines labor force participation rate as the ratio of the labor force to the working-age population, expressed as a percentage. The labor force is the sum of the number of persons employed and the number of persons unemployed. Looking at the adult category of 25-54 ages (Table 3), we find labor force participation rate for men nearly ninety five percent, and twenty five percent for women, for 1995. In 2009, labor force participation rate for men in the same category (25-54 years) dropped to ninety percent, while for women it increased to nearly thirty three per cent. This is clearly keeping in line with the global trend of declining male labor force participation and increases in female labor force participation

Table 3: Labour force participation rate (ILO estimates; by sex and age group, 2009)

Yr	Sex	Age	Labour force participn rate (percent)	Labour force ('000)	Population ('000)
1995	M	15+	74	2178.25	2943.234
1995	M	25-54	95.5	1452	1521
1995	F	15+	22.6	661.221	2930.41
1995	F	25-54	25.4	392	1541
2009	M	25-54	90.3	1995	2209
2009	M	15+	70.6	2775.588	3933.868
2009	F	25-54	32.9	736	2238
2009	F	15+	25.6	1010.165	3950.845

Source: KLIM dataset, 2009

Another indicator of labor force participation is the unemployment rate. The unemployment rate is defined as the “quotient resulting from dividing the total number of unemployed (for a country or a specific group of workers) by the corresponding labor force, which itself is the sum of the total persons employed and unemployed in the group” (ILO 2009).

Table 4: Unemployment rate (by sex)

Yr	Sex	Labour force ('000)	Unemployed ('000)	Unemployment rate (percent)
1997	MF	2978.334	474.8	16
1997	M	2255.734	349.4	16
1997	F	722.6	125.3	17
2003	MF	3261.6	473.4	14.5
2003	M	2406	334.7	13.9
2003	F	855.5	138.6	16
2005	MF	3414.9	486.3	14

2005	M	2506.4	328.8	13
2005	F	908.5	157.5	17

Source: KLIM dataset, 2009

We find that the unemployment rate (Table 4) for men in 1997 was 16 percent and 17 percent for women. Unemployment rates decreased for men by 2005 to 13 percent, but remained the same for women at 17 percent, keeping in mind that the overall population had also increased in the interim. In addition to looking at unemployment for adults, youth unemployment rates provide yet another perspective on the issue. The KLIM dataset defines young people as persons aged between 15 and 24, and adults are those aged 25 and above. Table 5 indicates that nearly 30 percent of Tunisian youth (female) were unemployed in 2005, compared to 31 percent of Tunisian youth (male) who were unemployed. This could be for a variety of reasons; primarily most of them are engaged in schools and colleges or in the process of starting a family. According to Ferchiou (1991) unemployment has been more of a problem in the 1990s than in the 1960s. The official data of the National Institute of Statistics, Tunisia, shows 76400.0 jobs were created in 2006, 74800.0 in 2010, and projects jobs creation at 81500.00 in 2011. Thus, on an average 71116.67 were created every year since 2006, when the number of unemployed has continued to rise from 335,9100 in 2005. The information also states “the declining share of agricultural employment (18.1% in 2009 against 44% in 1966) and increasing the share of industrial employment and tertiary (81.9% in 2009 against 56% in 1966) reflecting the evolution towards a new pattern of growth.” The government of Tunisia might see the progression of employment in the right direction, but its inability to create jobs creates social pressure on economic development (Ferchiou 1991).

Table 5: Youth Unemployment rate

Yr	Sex	Youth unemployment rate (percent)	Adult unemployment rate (percent)	Share of youth unemployed in total unemployed (percent)
1997	MF	31.9	10.8	48.6
1997	M	33.3	10.7	45.2
1997	F	29	11.1	58
2005	MF	30.7	10.2	42.3
2005	M	31.4	9.1	43
2005	F	29.3	13.5	41

Source: KLIM dataset, 2009

Table 6 provides some information on unemployment by educational attainment at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. Primary education aims to provide the basic elements of education (for example, at elementary or primary school and middle or lower secondary school). Literacy programs for adults are also classified under primary education. Secondary education is provided at high schools, teacher-training schools at this level, and schools of a vocational or technical nature. Tertiary education is provided at universities, teacher-training colleges, higher professional schools and sometimes distance learning institutions. We find that over 50 percent of persons with

primary level of education were unemployed in 1997. In 2005, this number reduced to 41 percent. Interestingly, more women, 23.3 percent with college education were unemployed, while only 9 percent of the men with college education were unemployed.

Table 6: Distribution of unemployment by level of educational attainment (distribution, by sex)

Yr	Sex	Primary (percent)	Secondary (percent)	Tertiary (percent)
1997	MF	53.4	30.8	3.6
1997	M	55.5	30.4	3.1
1997	F	47.9	32.1	5.1
2005	MF	41.4	37.7	13.6
2005	M	46	37.3	9
2005	F	32	38.5	23.3

Source: KLIM dataset, 2009

Studies have shown that women in most parts of the world are still struggling to get justice and equality. Social and cultural norms are often obstacles to enforcement of policies, but it is a different story when the state decides to implement and enforce reforms, as in the case of Tunisia. In Tunisia, the state by reforming the family law provided the impetus for change. As we examine women’s rights, especially as it pertains to women in the workplace. One of the major determinants that aid women in the workplace is education.

According to the “African Women’s Report, 2009: Measuring Gender Inequalities in Africa”, Tunisia spent 7.2 percent of its GDP on education (2007) which has steadily increased since 1980, when the government spent 5.2 percent. In comparison Algeria spent 4.3 percent (2008), Libya spent 3.4 percent (1980, no data available since), Morocco spent 5.7 percent (2008), which has stayed more or less around the same since 1980. Egypt spent 3.8 percent (2008), a decline from 4.2 percent (1980). In Tunisia, of the total population with at least secondary education, over the age of 25, 33.5 percent were women and 48 percent were men (2010). These numbers in education indicate that the Tunisian government has invested well in education its citizens, especially in women’s education.

Table 7: Indicators for Gender

Maternal mortality ration (deaths of women per 100,000 live births)	100
Population with at least secondary education, female/male ratio	0.698
Adolescent fertility rate (women aged 15-19 yrs) births per 1,000 (women aged 15-19)	6.9
Gender Inequality Index, value	0.515
Shares in parliament, female-male ratio	0.291
Maternal mortality ration (new estimates) (deaths of women per 100,000 births)	60
Gender Inequality Index (updated)	0.481

Source: International Human Development Indicators, 2010

Tunisia ranks at 81, and is among the high human development nations, according to the United Nations Human Development Report, 2008 – indicating longer life expectancy, better education and life opportunities for its citizens. In comparison, Algeria ranks 84, Morocco 114, Egypt at 101 and Libya 53. The Gini coefficient indicates the extent of inequality in any society, and is at 40 percent in Tunisia.

Tunisia ranks 56 on the Gender Inequality Index, with a value of 0.515. The Gender Inequality Index is a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievements between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labor market (HDR 2010). It varies between zero (when women and men are equal) and one (when they are unequal on all dimensions). Its neighbors, Libya has an index of 0.476, Morocco 0.655 and Algeria 0.571.

Expenditure on health, public (percent of GDP) is public health expenditure and consists of current and capital spending from government (central and local) budgets, external borrowings and grants (including donations from international agencies and nongovernmental organizations), and social (or compulsory) health insurance funds as defined by the World Bank (HDR 2010). The expenditure on public health is at 3 percent of GDP for Tunisia (2007). Libya spent 1.9 percent, Morocco spent 1.7 percent. Only Algeria spent 3.6 percent on public health. Adolescent fertility rate (births per thousand women 15-19) for Tunisian women (ages 15-19) was at 6.9 percent. Libya had 3.2 percent, Algeria 7.3 percent, Egypt 39.0 percent, and Morocco at 18.9 percent. We see that Tunisian women have consistently fared better at political, economic and social levels, with higher educational opportunities, better political and economic rights, and better health and wellness avenues.

Conclusion and future research

Tunisia has all the signs of a modern nation: an educated urban population, with government expenditure on education and health being higher than most developing nations. Yet strangely we find that more than half the population of working-age women is unemployed, and more than 65 percent of the women are economically inactive (KLIM 2009). Since women are as well educated as men, a question then arises as to why such a large part of the population does not participate in the labor force. Data seem to indicate and perhaps corroborate the existing view that the presence of social and cultural norms is the main reason for women's inability to participate in the economy. According to Lilia Ben Salem's report for the Freedom House, women's access to education has helped them enter the work force, but most women still work in the agricultural sector. Freedom House reports;

Some 23.9 percent of the active female workforce is employed in the agricultural and fishing sector, 37.7 percent in the service industry, and 38.3 percent in manufacturing, mostly in the textile industry. Women form 39 percent of the staff in the civil service, and 24.3 percent of women bureaucrats hold managerial positions. Many women work in the education sector, constituting 51 percent of primary school teachers, 48 percent of secondary school teachers, and 40 percent of higher education professors. Within the health field, women make up 42 percent of doctors, 72 percent of pharmacists, and 57 percent of dental surgeons. In recent years, women have been establishing their own businesses in larger numbers, and in the informal sector they show initiative in ensuring their self-employment. (*La Presse*, January 29, 2009 in Ben Salem 2010).

Interestingly, the International Labor organization also reports that in 1997 12.8 percent of the women were employed in the informal sector and 24.5 percent of men were employed in the informal sector. The informal sector is one which is not linked to any formal organization, public or private. The activities in this sector are labor-intensive and require few skills (Kamrava 2000). The informal sector often provides employment for the urban labor force in the developing world. Furthermore, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt are some of the more urbanized countries in North Africa (Kamrava 2000). We find in Tunisia a well-educated urban population, unfortunately with inadequate avenues for work, especially for women. The relationship between the educational attainment of workers and unemployment in countries is an important one. For it indicates the direction of social policy in order to benefit a nations' people. The information provided can have important implications for both employment and education policy. In Tunisia we see is an educated urban class of women, who have achieved legal and political rights, since the reform of the family law in 1956, and again in 1993 (Charrad 2007). As Tunisia becomes urbanized, we should expect more women to enter the work force. But women comprise only 37.5 percent of the labor force. Can we attribute women's lack of participation in labor force just due to social or cultural reasons, or has the state been unable to create jobs for its people? In a nation with the unemployment rate at 14 percent, it is reasonable to pause and look at other factors that might provide answers to the low involvement of women in the labor force. And what

about women in the agricultural areas? The International Labor Organization data indicate that agricultural areas suffer from high rates of unemployment. As the Freedom House data shows us there have efforts by the government to help women, but in the last decade there has not been done much to improve their situation, which appears to be unchanged. Despite new political turmoil, and the current economic situation, in a society where youth have little to look forward, Tunisian women have vowed to continue their fight for justice and equality. It is interesting to note that South Korea used its labor force to forge ahead, as did Brazil, China and India. Tunisia which has a large youthful labor force has been unable to do the same.

Tunisia, like many other developing nations, has legislated social policies. And unlike many developing nations has even implemented them. Despite the presence of social policies, we do see “uneven social protection, due to lack of enforcement or due to manipulation of social insurance to benefit only certain sectors” (Mares and Carnes 2009: 93). Often the choice of social policy is driven by structural conditions. These structural conditions include the domestic market size, abundance or scarcity of labor, asset inequality and openness of the international economy (Mares and Carnes 2009). Further analysis some of the structural conditions outlined above would yield more insight into the progress of women’s rights in Tunisia.

In conclusion, the study found that women had gained political, legal and economic rights. The gains they have made since 1956 has been substantial, but for the last decade or so, there has been a status quo. Compared to their neighbors, Tunisian women have had better access to education, improved health care and other opportunities. But, despite their education, women continue to remain a minority in the labor force. There also appears to be insufficient information about women in rural areas. An investigation of the structural conditions, both in urban and rural areas would provide better understanding of why women continue to be in the margins of the labor force participation, despite their success in social and political arenas.

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