



**Subject : Women and decision-making**

**N°**

**Source : BBC**

**Web Site :**

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-25916831>

**Country :  
Tunisia**

**Date :** 2014-01-28

**N° & [P] :**

## Tunisia's Ennahda and Ettakattol women MPs celebrate

By Naveena KottoorBBC News, Tunis



Lobna Jeribi formed an alliance with women in the main Islamist party to campaign for change

### Tunisian transition

Tunisia's new constitution could usher in momentous change for women, following the adoption of a clause which guarantees gender equality in legislative assemblies

**and for steps to be taken to protect women against violence, a first in the Arab world.**

"This article is a revolution in itself. It's a big, historic step, not only for Tunisian women," says Lobna Jeribi, who celebrated until the early hours of the morning after the constitution had been adopted.

Ms Jeribi is a member of the Ettakattol party, one of the secular coalition partners within the Islamist-led government.

"It was a very emotional moment for me when we passed it," she says.

Ms Jeribi, a scientist, admits the issue of guaranteeing women and men equal representation in parliament never crossed her mind until she became a member of the constituent assembly in 2011 to chart a new course for Tunisia following the uprising that overthrew long-serving ruler Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011.

"I always thought it was very much a feminist thing," she says.

"But we ourselves, in my party, were struggling to find women to participate in the political process. There is a culture and mentality of masculinity here. If we don't begin - the process will not start by itself."

But not everyone in the assembly agreed with her.

Her proposal led to a heated and emotional debate that lasted for three days and threatened to derail the vote on the constitution.

**'Discipline breaks'**

One of the sceptics was 60-year-old Fattouma Attia, an independent member of the assembly, who runs a textile business in the seaside resort of Hammamet.

"I was one of the first businesswomen in Tunisia," she says. "Not because someone decided there should be more women in business and handed me the opportunity, but because I wanted to run a business. I claimed my equal rights."



AFP

Women

have a long history of activism in Tunisia



AFP

Religious

extremists see the constitution as too secular

"I am convinced that a woman must take her place by herself, through her own will and her competence."

A key ally in Ms Jeribi's fight to get Article 45, the clause promoting equality, passed was Meherzia Labidi, vice-president of the assembly from the governing Islamist Ennahda party and the most senior female politician in the chamber.

**Women MPs around the world**

Global average: 21.8% (in lower houses of parliament)

Rwanda: 63.8 % - highest

Cuba: 48.9%

Nicaragua: 40.2%

Algeria: 31.6 %

Tunisia: 26.7 %

UK: 22.5 %

USA: 17.9 %

Libya: 16.5 %

India: 11%

Egypt: 4.4 %

Lebanon: 3.1 %

Yemen: 0.3 %

Qatar: 0 %

*Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union*

Ennahda has the highest number of female lawmakers - 41 out of 90.

"We survived despotism and dictatorship due to female resistance, while the men were in exile or in prison," says Ms Labidi.

She had been campaigning in favour of the amendment, despite resistance within her party, which for the first time failed to maintain party discipline during the vote.

"It's one of the articles in the constitution that I am most proud of," she says with a beaming smile.

Ms Labidi vehemently rejects the suggestion that women should strive for opportunities in political life themselves, without any support.

"I have always achieved everything I wanted myself. Sometimes I wonder whether men could compete with me," she says.

"But I am being realistic. Not all women can do this, they need to be given opportunities, that help them become leaders."

### **Admiring Merkel**

Ms Labidi points to the fact that she herself benefited from a parity clause that was applied for the first time during the 2011 election of the constituent assembly.

The election law had required that every electoral list include 50% women and 50% men and ensure they were placed alternately on the list.





AFP Many

Tunisians hope the constitution will set the country on a new path



AFP Many

women still live in poverty

"I could have said: 'I am a female leader now, that's enough for Tunisian women.' But I want to bring women along with me," Ms Labidi says.

It's music to Eya's ears. She is a 24-year old chemical engineer from Tunis who thinks the time has come to think big.

"I would love to see more senior female politicians," she says. "We have the potential.

"I dream of having a woman as prime minister, or even president - like Angela Merkel, she

just rocks. We have so many brilliant women in Tunisia. They could make a change."

But not everyone is as enthusiastic.

Hatem Minaoui is with the Tunisian Association for Men, Family and Society, and had been lobbying assembly members to reject Article 45 from the day the constitutional vote began.

"Why should we here in Tunisia be the exception? Wherever you go in the world it's the same, most heads of state are men, whether in Japan, the US, Germany, South Africa or India."

### **Apostasy banned**

Mr Minaoui is concerned that Article 45 provides a legal basis to discriminate against men.

"This new constitution protects women against violence, but why doesn't it explicitly protect men against violence? What if my wife beats me?"



REUTERS Female

MPs saw the adoption of the constitution as a milestone

By law Tunisian men and women have been equal since the 1950s, when President Habib Bourguiba passed the Personal Status Law of 1956.

But for many Tunisian women like Souhir, a 33-year-old university lecturer who teaches at the University of Kairouan, the country still has a long way to go to reduce sexual discrimination and reach gender equality.

"There is a huge gap between the law and what actually happens on the street," she says.

"Women have to say that they are married to be left alone. Once I was forbidden from sitting in a cafe because they were only men (there), and they told me women were trouble."

"It's at the level of society and mindsets where things need to change."

On the contentious issue of Islamic law, the constitution, unlike those in other Arab countries, does not make any direct reference to it.

Instead, it acknowledge's Tunisia's Arab and Muslim identity, guarantees religious freedom, prohibits apostasy and vows to protect "the sacred".

"We managed to reconcile things that are not easy to reconcile," says Selim Ben Abdessalem, a member of the largest opposition bloc Nidaa Tounes.

"We have combined references to our Muslim identity with references to universal human rights and freedoms. I think the vote and the text represent a large part of the Tunisian people."