

4-1-2012

Women in Post Revolutionary Tunisia: Political Inclusion and Prospects for the Future

Courtney Joline

SIT Graduate Institute - Study Abroad, cjoline@gwmail.gwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

 Part of the [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Joline, Courtney, "Women in Post Revolutionary Tunisia: Political Inclusion and Prospects for the Future" (2012). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. Paper 1272.

http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1272

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at DigitalCollections@SIT. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of DigitalCollections@SIT. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.

Courtney Joline
Women in Post Revolutionary Tunisia: Political Inclusion and Prospects for the Future
May 7, 2012
SIT: Spring 2012
Professor Mounir Khelifa
Adviser: Raja Bousseadra

As the world turns its attention to Tunisia as the first state to undergo the democratic transition in the phenomenon known as the Arab Spring, women's status has been a dominant theme among policy analysts, journalists, and scholars. As people debate their means of mobilization, I sought to document how women see their futures and their opinion of the democratic transition, and most importantly what this holds for women. This piece seeks to give women agency and a forum for them to share their stories, opinions, and perspectives of the future. In a time when so many thinkers are getting caught up in the current divisive political debate, it is important to look to the future and determine the goals of this democratic transition.

I would first like to thank Mounir Khelifa and Raja Boussedra for their patience, support, and ideas as I worked to complete this project. Their support was imperative to the completion of this project, and their contacts ensured that I had a fair representation of Tunisian women. I thank them with the upmost gratitude. I would like to thank my host family for their hospitality and for including me as the newest member of their family. Special thanks to Khadija Meherzi, who provided the inspiration for this project and to Badre, for always giving a new perspective on Tunisian post-revolutionary development. Additionally, I show my appreciation to all of the women who took time out of their busy schedules to meet with me and discuss their opinions. Their passion, fortitude, and optimism are inspiring and I look forward to watching them transform Tunisian society.

Outline:

- I. Introduction
- II. Research Question and Methodology
- III. History of Women's Rights and Legislation in Tunisia
- IV. Women's Representation in Civic and Political Society Pre-Revolution
- V. Women's Activism During the Revolution
- VI. Women in the Interim Government
- VII. Interviews
- VIII. Analysis and Final Conclusions

Introduction

After a successful revolution that led to the dismantling of the Ben Ali dictatorship, Tunisia still has a long process of realizing the goals of the revolution. Despite participating side by side with men during the uprisings, women have not obtained an equitable amount of leadership positions as compared to men, as evidenced by their low levels of representation in political party leadership and government posts. In spite of the electoral parity law and the ease of the October 23 Constituent Assembly elections, women have not yet been included in the official political discourse. As Tunisia works to remake its political identity, women now have the opportunity to create their own political consciousness and be at the forefront of post-revolutionary development.¹

Women played a significant role in the revolution and worked alongside men in organizing online, taking to the streets, and blogging, yet the status of women in the future state

¹ Boussedra, Raja. Lecture. March 13, 2012

is still in question by leaders, social movements, and feminists². Tunisia has not yet solidified its post-revolutionary identity; the uncertainty about the direction of the country worries some women because of the lack of transparency about what the future holds for them. This uncertainty of the woman's place in Tunisian society forms the basis for this research project. I look to analyze the means in which elite women are mobilizing, becoming involved in politics, and what they believe are the biggest challenges and solutions to creating an independent female political consciousness. It has yet to be seen if women as a collective whole will accept their fate as second-class citizens with limited political means or work to combat extremism and include themselves in a democratic, politically inclusive Tunisia, and it is unclear that if their rights should be jeopardized, how will they react³. Based upon the interviewee's answers, it will be clear whether or not elite activist women will take agency over their political futures or remain on the sidelines of Tunisian political and civic development.

Research Question and Methodology

I started my research at CREDIF, the Center for the Research, Studies, Documentation, and Information of Women, in Tunis where I had access to the Personal Status Code, constitutional reforms affecting women, and statistics detailing male and female participation throughout Tunisian society. This provided a basis for my understanding of the gains and challenges facing women, and served as a foundation for my other research. I then reviewed the history of the women's movement, which served as background information in order to create context for this project and help create interview questions. I was limited with background materials in English; there are very few works detailing the history of the women's movement, but I used literature from the Center for Maghreb Studies in Tunis (CEMAT), from my

² Ibid.

³ Boussedra, Raja, Conversation. March 23 2012

university library database, and news articles to provide the most up to date coverage of current developments. I utilized the works of the following authors for historical and social context: Emma C. Murphy⁴, who provided a background of the legal and social gains women made under the Bourgiba and Ben Ali regimes; Lilia Labidi⁵ and her discussion of transnationalism promoting the women's movement and the historical basis for the modern Maghrebi feminist movement, leading to the formation of a social identity of women; and Janine Astrid Clark and Jillian Schwedler's⁶ focus on women's activism in Islamist parties. Louisa Dris-Ait Hamadouche⁷ served as a strong resource, for she raised the question of how Maghrebi women can become active participants in political society. While she wrote years before the revolution, her description of the female situation in economics, politics, and society pointed to the continued work that needs to be done to ensure female representation in Maghrebi society and how women are working throughout the states progress towards democratic reform⁸. She points to the social conservatism of the Maghreb that continued to define women and the growth of progressive and Islamic militancy in politics, targeting social issues like female education; the pervasive political apathy among men and women, and finally tensions between Islamist and secular modes of activism⁹. Her work served as a basis for greater understanding about the obstacles and means of activity afforded to Maghreb women in the years prior to the revolution.

⁴Murphy, Emma C. "Women in Tunisia-Between State Feminism and Economic Reform" in *Women and Globalization in the Middle East: Gender, Economy, and Society*. Edited by Eleanor Abdella Doumato. Lynne Rienner Publishers. 2003.

⁵ Labidi, Lillia. "The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women's Associations in the Maghreb: The Case of AFTURD and ATFD in Tunisia." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Special Issue: Transnational Theory, National Politics, and Gender in the Contemporary Middle East/North Africa, Winter 2007, pages 6-34.

⁶ Clark, Jane Astrid and Jillian Schwedler. "Who Opened the Window? Women's Activism in Islamist Parties." *Comparative Politics*. Volume 35, No. 3 (April 2003), pages 293-312.

⁷ Dris-Ait- Hamadouche, Louisa. "Women in the Maghreb: Civil Society's Actors or Political Instruments?" *Middle East Policy*, Winter 2007. Volume 14, Issue 4. Pages 115-133.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

These background materials aided the creation of interview questions, and throughout a two-week period I conducted nine interviews with elite women from Tunis that are active in different areas within the Tunisian post-revolutionary movement. These women are between the ages of 18 and 40, and members of the middle class of Tunisia. They serve as representatives of the elite female political class: English speakers, college educated, and active within civil society.¹⁰ They are at the forefront of post-revolutionary political activity and have demonstrated leadership from the time of the revolution and beyond. These women are a small segment of the Tunisian female population, and do not represent all of the female activists within Tunisia based upon their credentials and extent of participation and knowledge. It is the hope that they provide the input from the highest rungs of female leadership and will ultimately shape the strategies and direction of the Tunisian women's movement.

Through these interviews, I look to obtain a greater understanding of how these elite civil society leaders and activists will transform into key political players. These women serve as leading mobilizers within civil society and focus their efforts on educating the population. I chose these women because they are the best hope for women to serve as crusaders and pioneers of female politicians, and will hopefully serve as an impetus for other Tunisian women to get active. Using their experiences, I wish to determine how women are navigating post-revolutionary Tunisia and their prospects for representation in the new political climate.

With this research project, I will discuss the following questions:

- Do women feel a sense of urgency about the current situation facing women?

¹⁰ The exception to this is Feiza Skandriani, who is a woman in her late fifties and serves as president of Parity and Equality. She spoke on behalf of her organization and the younger women who are represented in its membership.

- Will they remain hostage to the political system or carve a new space to realize their political and social ideals of equality, parity with men, and political inclusion?
- What will women's roles be for the future and how do they define their roles in post-revolutionary political Tunisia?
- How will women and their respective associations and political groups retain their autonomy?

It is the hope that this project will present the female perspective about their potential for political inclusion and the roles they see themselves capturing in the immediate future; I wish to give agency to the women who are recreating the social and political discourse surrounding women. As a main force behind the revolution, their input is critical for the continued success of the democratic transition and it is important to determine how women view their opportunities and strategies for a political future.

History of Women's Rights and Legislation in Tunisia

Tunisia has been the shining example of modernity, due to its rampant modernization, extensive development, and most importantly its women's rights initiatives¹¹. In a region where women's social development has significantly lagged in relation to the rest of the world, women in Tunisia have been included in the national conversation, through their participation in the economy and relative political and social rights¹². Tunisia has served as a model for women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa due to the promulgation of the Personal Status Code (henceforth known as the 'Code') in 1956¹³. This legislation began the process of female egalitarianism in Tunisia and created a new Tunisian identity centered on progressive values and

¹¹ Boussedra, Raja. Lecture. March 13 2012

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Boussedra, Raja, Conversation. April 30 2012.

relative gender equality. In the aftermath of Tunisian independence, President Bourgiba aspired to construct a modern state and used the growth of progressive laws for women and the economy to present to the world¹⁴. Bourgiba bet on women, through family planning, education, and women's liberation to create a new state with a modern and progressive identity that would serve as an example in the Arab world¹⁵. Women were used as a cornerstone of his development project and one of the strategies was through the installation of gender equality under the law, starting with the Code¹⁶.

The Personal Status Code has had a tremendous impact on the way women are viewed in Tunisia. Women I have spoken to in Tunisia cite the Code as the main reason that they have so many more freedoms when compared to other women in Arab and Islamic countries¹⁷. It has become standard for women to have a public life, with both a career and family. Not all Tunisians have supported the Code, however¹⁸. Bourgiba knew that religious conservatives would be against this progressive legislation and so he used the concept of *ijtihad*, or interpretation of the Quran, to accommodate these viewpoints.¹⁹ According to Murphy, Bourgiba did not depart from Islamic values and established new means of morality, by providing a space for a family and social life, without upsetting the basic tenets of Islam²⁰. He rationalized the legislation into an Islamic framework and sought to end the tradition of the double standard and adapt Islamic law to fit the needs of the modern Muslim state²¹. Today, despite the vocal opposition of the Personal Status Code by radical Islamists groups, many women prize Bourgiba

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ghribi, Nadya. Conversation. March 15 2012.

¹⁸ Bousseadra, Raja. Conversation. April 30 2012.

¹⁹ Murphy 173

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

with being forward thinking and ensuring that they have the most progressive family law in the Arab world²².

The Code was created even before there was a Tunisian constitution; women's rights were more of an immediate priority than national consolidation and he wanted to ensure that women's legal gains were legalized without any interference²³. Women were given rights straightaway, for in 1957 women voted for the first time in elections and two years later 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".²⁴ Gender equality was henceforth legalized under Tunisian law. Further legislation affording women new rights abounded under Bourgiba. The Tunisian government sought to create a fair and equitable nature of economic opportunity and advancement for women and ensured a gradual process of social, political, and economic reforms for women.

These gains came at a price, however, namely in the lack of female organizational autonomy²⁵. Bourgiba, and later Ben Ali utilized state feminism through their direct support of the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT), which sought to teach women about their national rights, but also more importantly mobilize women in support of the governmental party, Neo-Destour.²⁶ Female-centered legislation came through a top-down approach instead of a societal shift and was only promoted because it fit the government's ideals of a modern state.²⁷ According to Murphy, the Personal Status Code was one of Bourgiba's methods to centralize his power and neutralize the standard tribal opposition, by making the immediate family the focal

²² Ghribi, Nadya. Conversation. March 15 2012.

²³ Bousseadra, Raja. Lecture. March 13 2012.

²⁴ Murphy 173

²⁵ Bousseadra, Raja. Conversation. April 30 2012.

²⁶ Murphy 173

²⁷ Ibid. 175

point of the state.²⁸ Bourgiba created a secure, loyal constituency, ensuring that there was no autonomous feminist movement and ensuring that despite any governmental action, women could not take action against the state because of the government's oversight over women's organizations.²⁹

Ben Ali continued this trend and continued to promote Tunisia as an example of a modern, female-oriented state. Tunisia sought to be a leader in the Arab world for the promotion of women's rights, going so far as hosting the 2004 Arab League Summit where they called on "the promotion of the rights of Arab women as a fundamental axis of the process of development and modernization of Arab societies".³⁰ In 2006, Ben Ali promised to support "all efforts on the regional and international level... to establish a solid basis for a broad Arab renaissance in which men and women share the same responsibilities on equal footing".³¹ Tunisian statehood was grounded in the belief that key members of Tunisia's modernization program were women, and sought to create egalitarian spheres as a hallmark of Tunisia's process. Through both the Bourgiba and Ben Ali regimes, women's advancement was a cornerstone of the national project³².

Despite the rise in women's associations, research centers, and organizations in the early years of Ben Ali's regime, in reality they were special interest groups that were created in support of the Tunisian regime.³³ All women's associations and activist groups had to get formal recognition and support from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, which restricted female associational autonomy, despite the growth of women's groups, for these organizations were

²⁸ Ibid. 175

²⁹ Ibid. 175-177

³⁰ Labidi 7

³¹ Ibid. 8

³² Boussedra, Raja. Conversation. April 30 2012.

³³ Murphy 170

meant to contribute to, not challenge, policy.³⁴ Unfortunately for women, they were limited in their scope of activism, for even when social issues pertinent to women were raised in the public forum, there was no room to express opposing views due to government infiltration of official women's groups, as the "consciousness as an interest group [remained] that of a co-opted elite rather than that of a mass protest or liberation movement".³⁵ Women's movements still had a long way to go before they could actually make a true and lasting impact on the Tunisian political scene.

Women's Representation in Civic and Political Society Pre-Revolution

Despite the government's efforts to include women in the national conversation, women have been excluded relative to their male counterparts. In 2001, women comprised only 9.3% of the government as compared to 90.7% of men.³⁶ Membership in the RCD Central Committee has only increased from 3.1% in 1957 to 21.2% in 1998.³⁷ This slow growth points to the lack of social acceptance for women's inclusion in the highest office and ensures that women are only included in superficial measures. These statistics are not limited to conservative or Islamist parties, but also Leftist and progressive organizations. In the year 2000, leftist parties including the Unionist Democratic Union, Progressive Socialist Rally, the Liberal Social Party, Movement of the Socialist Democrats, Popular Union Party, and the Ettajid Movement boasted few women in their parties' ranks.³⁸ Out of all of those parties there was only one woman compared to 76 men in the political bureau, fifty-five women compared to 420 men in the national central council, three generals to sit a compared to 84 men in that same position.³⁹ In total, leftist parties

³⁴ Ibid. 178

³⁵ Ibid. 186

³⁶ Mahmoud, Driria. *Tunisian Men and Women in Figures*. Center for Research, Documentation, and Information on Women. Signes. 2002, 86.

³⁷ Ibid, 89

³⁸ Ibid, 91

³⁹ Ibid, 91

and their central structures boasted only 59 women in central leadership as compared to 580 men.⁴⁰ This points to the trend that political parties, regardless of political orientation, denied women full and equitable access to positions of power within their leadership structure. In 2000 CREDIF studied the representation of women in the civil service, the heart of decision making in the central government. There were no female permanent under-secretaries, 6.1% of the Director Generals were women; 10.9% of directors were female; 14.6% assistant directors were women; and 19.8% head of departments were women.⁴¹ Despite the legislation that promotes women's equality, and the economic and social opportunities afforded to women, women were not given leadership positions under the previous regime, and the revolution started when women did not have direct access to political power. Women were excluded from political leadership and had little officially sanctioned room to exert themselves to create effective change.

Women's Activism During Revolution

During the month-long Tunisian Revolution, women were at the forefront of revolutionary activity⁴². Despite not having a political voice under the Bourgiba and Ben Ali regimes, women transformed their social and political role during the revolution by the sheer number and passion exhibited on the streets.⁴³ Women had a variety of means to be active, grounded in their historic relationship with civil society and media, both print and online. The revolution showed that women had an opinion and gave them the opportunity to exert themselves on behalf of a national political and social cause.

Besides being members of women's associations women sought to further their civic space through media. Women's ties to print media stem from their relationship with the short-

⁴⁰ Ibid, 89

⁴¹ Ibid, 93

⁴² Boussedra, Raja. Lecture. March 13 2012

⁴³ Ibid.

lived magazine *Nissa*, launched in 1985 and in publication for two years⁴⁴. The magazine, according to Lilia Labidi, worked towards the promotion of women's rights and challenging the status quo, all with full autonomy as the editors did not want to be reliant on anyone or any association.⁴⁵ *Nissa* aimed to "enable women to question their own identity...proposing a different message about this world... from which women are excluded...[laying] the groundwork for a freer and more equitable society".⁴⁶ Their access to media online and the obstacles they overcame provided them with the tools and media experience to effectively mobilize during the Tunisian revolution.

Following this journalistic endeavor's example, women have created a new community online and on social media websites to highlight their concerns with the direction of the state, during the Bourgiba and Ben Ali regimes, as well as during the revolution and in response to the interim government. In addition to taking to the streets, the Internet has become a seat of activism for younger women. Countless women, including those interviewed for this project, have posted on Facebook, blogged about the events taking place on the street, and spread the news amongst Tunisians and around the world. The face of the female Tunisian blogger is Lina Ben Mheni, also known as 'Tunisian Girl,' exemplifies women's media activism.⁴⁷ She won the 2011 Deutsche Welle International Blog Award in June 2011 for her work in writing about the Ben Ali's regime abuses and her site later became a source of information for revolutionary activity.⁴⁸ Her work included posting pictures of dead bodies, documenting the violence perpetuated by the Ben Ali government.⁴⁹ She continues to blog about the current Tunisian government situation and complains that "The Tunisian Press is neither independent nor

⁴⁴ Labidi

⁴⁵ Labidi 12

⁴⁶ Labidi 12

⁴⁷ Boussedra, Raja. Conversation. April 30 2012.

⁴⁸ Ayari, Chamselassil. "Tunisian Girl Blogs for Freedom and Democracy," Deutsche Welle. December 12 2011.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

unbiased.”⁵⁰ Under the current interim government, she writes about the continued struggle to realize the ideals of the revolution and the need for continued reform and vigilance.⁵¹ She is representative of a new class of women, using the tools of modernity to challenge the status quo from outside the political spectrum. Through various means of activism and a diverse set of strategies, women were a major presence during the uprising and Tunisia came to realize that they were a force to be reckoned with.

Women in the Interim Government

After the revolution, the first test of the democratic transition came in the form of the October 23 Constituent Assembly elections. Prior to the elections, the interim government instituted a gender parity agreement, in which every other candidate on each party list had to be a woman to ensure equitable male and female opportunities to be elected into office. The final election results led to the formation of a government coalition known as the Troika consisting of Ennahda, Ettatakol, and Congress for the Republic. After the election results were finalized, women currently make up 24% of the Constituent Assembly, or 49 members out of a total of 217, with 42 of them coming from Ennahda.⁵² Other parties were not successful in promoting female candidates, and the only political party to have a woman as the party executive, the Democratic Progressive Party, only received 7% of the total vote.⁵³ Despite their leading role in the protests, there was no change in the percentage of female representation in government. The numbers remained stagnant compared to those under the Ben Ali regime. Prior to the revolution, women comprised 22.7% of the 214-person chamber of deputies and 13% of the 112-seat

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Oslo Freedom. “Lila Ben Mhenni.” Oslo Freedom Forum. http://www.oslofreedomforum.com/speakers/lina_ben_mhenni.html

⁵² Ajmi, Sana. “Women’s Status in the Constituent Assembly.” 28 October 2011. Tunisia Live. <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2011/10/28/women-status-in-the-constituent-assembly/>

⁵³ Ibid.

Chamber of advisers, with 7 female members of government⁵⁴. In a revolution that spoke of gender equality and parity, women did not achieve a greater foothold in electoral successes. Despite having open and free elections, women have yet to cross the threshold into true democratic, full representation as political leaders on a larger scale.

The party that boasted the largest number of women was Ennahda, a moderate Islamist party that came to power, despite being banned under Ben Ali and with its founder Rachid Ghannouchi in exile in London at the time of the revolution. According to party founder Ghannouchi, Ennahda promotes the ideals of a moderate Islam and that there will be no change to the personal status code or any progressive legislation.⁵⁵ Many people have been fearful of the changes taking place and the potential upset of all of the progressive gains under the previous regimes, but he stressed the party's willingness to maintain progressive legislation like the Personal Status Code.⁵⁶ Women fear Ennahda's stance because they have yet to offer an outright opinion on women and any legislation concerning them. The lack of transparency, a concern voiced by most subjects spoken to in this research project, creates a sense of uncertainty and concern about the status of women in Tunisia.

While they will not ground the constitution in Shariah, meaning that it will not serve as a source of legal thought, there is still some ambiguity surrounding its intentions towards Article 1 of the Constitution; this article stipulates that Islam is the religion of the state, but does not mention the Sharia as a source of legal thought.⁵⁷ According to Ennahda official Ameer Larayed, "Ennahda has decided to retain the first clause of the previous constitution without change. We

⁵⁴ The Tunisian Cultural and Information Center. "Women in Public Life."

http://www.tunisiancenterusa.com/pub_life.html

⁵⁵ Lewis, Aiden. "Profile: Tunisia's Ennahda Party." BBC. 25 October 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15442859>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Reuters. "Tunisia's Ennahda to Oppose Sharia in Constitution." Reuters. 26 March 2012. <http://news.yahoo.com/tunisia-ennahda-oppose-sharia-constitution-112058311.html>

want the unity of the people and we do not want divisions”⁵⁸. Ennahda has promised not to force the veil on women and will not change the Code, but Salafist organizations and protests spread uncertainty about the intentions of the leading political party and the direction of society potentially leaning towards Islamic values⁵⁹. The lack of transparency and the inability to determine a clear political platform leaves many Tunisian women uncertain about their possibilities for future political inclusion and to increase their presence in leadership positions⁶⁰. It is within this context, of political transition, democratic consolidation, and the remaking of the post-revolutionary Tunisian identity, that I wish to explore the future prospects for female political inclusion.

Interviews

With this background knowledge, I was prepared to create interview questions and schedule meetings with my contacts among the Tunisian female activist community. In a two-week period I met with the following women: Feiza, the president of Parity and Equality, an NGO that works on increasing gender parity in government and political parties; Meriem, a former Student Unionist with connections to the International Republican Institute and Eye Watch, and is very active in women’s issues; Omezzine, a party member of Ettatakol and focusing on youth and female integration into the party; Asma, a member of ATFD; cyber-activist and blogger Jolanare; Maria, researcher at CAWTAR; Souha, ATFD activist and law student; Ines, English professor and activist; and Jawhara, a Constituent Assembly member from Ennahda. These women represent a variety of modes of activism and the methods in which elite political women of Tunisia have worked to create a political and social space. These are all young elite women who have access to political activism and will hopefully serve as the future leaders of the women’s

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Meherzi, Khadija. Conversation. March 1 2012.

political movement of Tunisia. Their answers will help create a hypothesis about the path that Tunisian women will take to create a political and social voice and space for themselves.

Based upon the conversations, I gained a better insight into the elite activist perspective on the status of women in politics, the challenges facing them, and how they look to overcome these issues. They strive to make a new realm for women and politics through effective organization and continued perseverance. It is evident that women share a consensus on the challenges, participation, and the means in which they could challenge the status quo and are passionate about their future activism and roles in Tunisian society.

I asked each woman the following questions and then followed them with an open discussion:

1. How did women participate in the revolution and did you personally participate? How?
2. Do you think Tunisia is moving in the right direction?
3. Do you feel women are being threatened in post-revolutionary Tunisia?
4. Will women have a leading role in creating post-revolutionary Tunisia or will they be sidelined?
5. Do you think Ennahda and the current Islamic discourse will have staying power in Tunisia? Do you think that the current Islamist dominance will continue in the future?
6. What will the biggest challenge be for women to create political space for themselves?
7. Do you believe that there will be an issue of autonomy for new and old women's associations, or groups that focus on women's issues?
8. How willing are women to fight for their right to have a civic and political space?
9. What makes a woman's mobilization effective?
10. How are women currently represented in political and civil society? How do you think women can increase their presence in these areas?
11. Where are women most politically and civically active-online or in the streets?
12. What is the kind of Tunisia you would like to see in the next 5-10 years?

All of these women were extremely active during the Revolution and they witnessed firsthand the potential of Tunisia to fight for their dignity and promote their values of fairness, democracy, and a higher standard of living for all. They took to the streets to protest, organized with friends on Facebook, spread viral images and news through social media, and created a network of

activism. Even Jawhara, who was not in Tunis at the time of the protests served as a spectator and was active with friends and colleagues on Facebook. They stress that activism at that time was not engendered and it was only during the post-revolutionary period that questions of gender and the separation of gendered space was brought up; during the uprising, there was no gender distinction and men and women cooperated together. It has only been after the revolution that the question of gender and roles in society has appeared, shifting the political thought from one of inclusion to exclusion. It seems that many find that women are useful for activism, but leadership positions remain closed off to them.

As Tunisia undergoes the democratic transition, there are many questions about what the future holds for women, society, and the general direction of the state. It is beyond the scope of this paper and even among the people of Tunisia to determine what the future will hold for post-revolutionary Tunisia. None of the women could provide a sure answer to the question of Tunisia's direction, but instead had both positive and negative comments on the current state. All of the women I spoke to have complained that there is such uncertainty and lack of transparency about political platforms that no one knows what the dominant narrative and identity will be. Policies, news, and events are constantly changing in Tunisia and it is evident that any future projections are futile. It is clear to women, however, that the dominant mentality of male patriarchy and female limitation has not changed. They are concerned about the vocalization of the Salafist movement and their lack of censure by the government, especially after violence at Manouba University and other instances of social discord. Feiza is concerned by the viral attacks online against women, the struggle between secularists and Islamists that play out throughout Tunisian society, and the conversation that seeks to redefine women's place in Tunisia. She

would like to see the authorities step in and limit their presence, and to not undermine the process of social and political reconciliation.

Other women were more optimistic about the current political climate. Meriem is hopeful, for she says that prior to the revolution there was no culture of independent NGOs, but now there is an open forum for political development. She finds that this period of transition is a time of learning, training, and development. Despite the divisiveness and uncertainty, more people are finding new ways to express their political beliefs. People are looking for training and youth have become more active, which is a sign of more progressive political development in the future. Politics has become the dominant conversation and she is hopeful that people will be pushed into action to create a better future for them. Tunisia is still trying to remake its identity and it will not fix all of the issues of the democratic transition in the immediate future. There are both positive and negative developments in post-revolutionary Tunisia, and as women begin to navigate and work with those hurdles, they can begin to claim their own space.

These women are not overly concerned about the discourse surrounding women and the events that have taken place between Salafist groups and the rest of the public. In addition, they do not fear legislative change from the government and some of the women have said that an Islamic majority in government is a one-term phenomenon. In spite of the rhetoric surrounding the discussion of the place of women in society, all of the women here are hopeful that their fellow Tunisians will do the right thing and ensure that Tunisia's historic progressive and modernist outlook will be maintained. Meriem believes in the intelligence and motivation of her fellow countrymen and women, that they will do the right thing and not allow the values that Tunisia has maintained for the past fifty years to be eradicated after one election and only a year and a half since revolution. She says, "I don't have faith in the government, but I have faith in my

fellow countrymen and women—they will do the right thing.” They are optimistic about Tunisia’s future and have hope that their fellow countrymen, and women, will make the right decisions about human rights, the democratic transition, and the future of Tunisia. They recognize that the political progress they wish to see will not be immediate, but are hopeful in the strength of Tunisia’s strong progressive history to overcome the divisions and social setbacks they encounter.

As women navigate the social discourse and the re-identification of Tunisia, the focus turns to female political activity and representation. A central component of my paper is the question of whether women will be aptly represented in politics, and how to increase their official representation in political spaces. All of the women I interviewed complained about the lack of female representation, citing the statistics and lack of progress in increasing parity in government and within the top party positions. Despite having an electoral parity law that forced party lists to alternate between male and female candidates, there was no provision that had this parity requirement for the heads of party lists, ensuring that women did not have access to the highest levels of party leadership, according to Maria. I asked Maria if she believed that the parity law was actually a good move for women. I raised my concerns about the threat of women who are incompetent gaining seats in government, and ultimately doing a poor job, thereby threatening the future electoral successes of women. She agreed that that was a concern, and that the parity law still faced some reservations among women. These women wish to create a Tunisia in which there is no need for a parity electoral law, and that all candidates are invited to represent Tunisia on the basis of their skill.

Additionally, Jawhara complained about the lack of a female presence in government and was disappointed that there are only two female cabinet ministers, again denying women to public

platforms. All of the women complained about how political parties are established and that the logistics block female participation: meetings are held at night during the week and it is made very difficult for women to balance their careers, household responsibilities, and insert political activism in their lives. Even if women wish to become involved on the party level, it is difficult to balance all of their duties. The logistics of current political organization remain closed for women. Activist women would like these hurdles to be removed and to change the way political parties are run, so that women do not have to choose between all of the responsibilities imposed upon them.

Omezzine discusses that many women who aspire to political office are fearful of having a public presence; women are thereby limiting themselves for fear of taking on a public role and seeming to disregard their familial obligations. I compared this with the number of women who are members of the interim government and members of Ennahda. As the majority of women in the Constituent Assembly are from Ennahda, Omezzine's hypothesis seems apt. Ennahda promotes a certain set of ideals for men and women, and this very party may actually provide women with a greater opportunity to get involved with political parties, amidst the current Islamic discourse that has become increasingly popular.

The numbers, and the political parties featuring women, in the Constituent Assembly point to a larger trend in Tunisian politics: women have become increasingly tied to the moderate Islamism promoted by Ennahda. Among Maghreb women, however, Islamic feminism has been on the rise, as they "advocate women's rights, gender equality, and social justice grounded in an Islamic framework"⁶¹. Many women are becoming interested in Islamist movements because of the uncertainty wrought by the state dictatorships, and they are increasingly attracted to the

⁶¹ Hamadouche 120

cultural, and ultimately Islamic values, promoted by Arab mass media⁶². It is unclear if Tunisian women are becoming increasingly conservative, or if they are projecting an image to gain acceptance among a population that does not hold women and politics in high regard. Women use Islamic values and movements to gain parity with men and Islamic leaders point to Islamic values in the Hadith and Quran to promote women's equality, gender parity, and respect.⁶³ It seems that some women may look to Islamist parties as a means to a political end. These tensions are still apparent as women now how to contend with a legitimate, government supported Islamist movement, pushing many to become active in Islamist parties.

Jane Astrid Clark and Jillian Schwedler explore women's activism in Islamic parties. They write that when parties are preoccupied with outside concerns, availability opens for women, but once these issues are resolved, women are once again pushed to the sidelines.⁶⁴ The political parties that the authors analyzed opened means for women to mobilize, through the creation of women's sectors, focusing on increasing women's membership.⁶⁵ Through the inclusion of women into superficial leadership positions, women did not feel the need to increase women's leadership saying that society was not ready for female leadership⁶⁶. As Tunisia undergoes the development of its post-revolutionary identity, and women begin to become involved in political discourse, women may use the Islamic political undercurrent to insert themselves into the discourse. It remains unclear why so many women in government are from Ennahda and why they garnered so much electoral support, but it is clear that women may use this as a springboard for future political development.

⁶² Ibid 128

⁶³ Ibid 129

⁶⁴ Clark and Schwedler 294

⁶⁵ Ibid 300

⁶⁶ Ibid 301

Outside of Ennahda, women recognize the unfairness of the current government make-up, and while it is progressive when compared to the rest of the Arab world, it does not highlight the foundation of the Tunisian revolutionary movement. Women are disenchanted with the process of democratic transition, because there is not a place in political parties or government, except through women and youth branches, for them to be represented. Despite these reservations, however, women were optimistic about the prospect of women having power in the future, but they recognize that it will take time, effort, and substantial campaigning. Working with NGOs and online, according to Jolanare and Maria, allows women to hold the government accountable and be free from any organizational oversight. They have found an accessible source of activism, where they can have a direct impact on the future of the national conversation. It is a perfect opportunity for women to insert their own beliefs, for cyber-activists are working on creating a new realm for the opposition movement, according to Maria. Women are at the forefront of civil society and are shaping the direction of associations and online activity as these forums reform and navigate in a new political environment. Now more than ever, women can make a direct impact in this area.

My interviewees noted that women feel more comfortable working outside of politics largely because they are afraid of putting themselves and their families in the public space. Asma said that women believe civil society could be seen as more important than having political power, because civil society provides a platform; thus by women's inclusion in NGOs, they are indirectly shaping the direction of the state. As opposed to politics, civil society provides a balance for women, allowing them to effectively navigate between their feminine roles of house and family, while still having an activist role. It was clear that the women saw civil society as

more accessible, for it provides a career and does not place too much of a burden on any individual woman, so there is more room for maneuvering individual activism.

NGOs had to achieve governmental support and recognition in order to be effective and were reliant on government funding. All of the women were in agreement that there is no government cooption of opposition movements and that there is a new and developing culture of strong and effective civil society. The question of autonomy brought up a new conversation in my interviews, for many of the women had issues with organizational and political membership. There is hope that the culture of civil society will develop on its own and serve as a counterpoint to official government. Autonomy has been established between civil society and government, but new questions arise at the potential of women to be active and autonomous outside any official civil society organization and NGO.

Only two of the women I interviewed were members of political parties; the rest either dissolved their party membership after the October 23 elections or are just part of civil society. Asma, Souhe, and Meriem were members of Ettatakol, but after it became a member of the Troika, the party lost its legitimacy among many women and youth. They feel that the party did not live up to its democratic ideals and it is tainted by entering in a government coalition and its cooperation with a government that does not please many revolutionaries further weakens its appeal. Conversely, Ines believes that a woman can be more successful if she does not have ties and affiliation with a singular organization, but instead participates in many demonstrations. She even mentioned the possibility of youth and women creating new political parties to ensure that they are fully represented in government and the party leadership. It seems that the current political discourse turns many people off to a political future, for it is not necessary to be active in politics. The question of autonomy now turns to inter-party and inter-governmental autonomy,

rather than a top-down control. Women are looking to define their own means of activism and wish to be autonomous from any oversight, both political and organizational.

Women's concept of space in civil society also helps them recognize the political and social challenges they face, the biggest coming from the Tunisian mentality and underlying patriarchal attitudes, despite Tunisia's history of a progressive personal status code and labor laws.

Professor Ines explained it clearly when she discussed her views on the sociological reasons for women's disempowerment in Tunisian society. The separation between men and women from a young age ensures that gender dynamics are skewed. All the women detail the unique status that Tunisian women hold in relation to Arab society. This, however, does not change the social and cultural values that prevent women from having a political role in society. According to Ines, men drag women down and Tunisia "can't emancipate women without emancipating men" from old-fashioned ideas about women's place in society. The separation between genders and the disconnect between gender roles and public space ensure that many paths to leadership are closed to women.

In addition to the mentality, Meriem discussed the limits placed upon youth and women by the older generations. She remarked on the growing diversity of opinion and identities among youth, but that the growth of opposition makes older people nervous because of the fears of diversity. Many people view the growth of opinions as a detriment to a successful political transition. The older generation, according to Meriem, wants to maintain the status quo and keep the peace; they do not like the divisiveness and questions of identity that dominate the political discourse. Government is too fragile and the situation is uncertain, so many older people are unwilling to invite young and female revolutionaries in the discourse to possibly stem the divisions that permeate Tunisian society. This question of plurality also raises the challenge of working with

people who have opinions different and compromising. The hurdle is to create change and be inclusive, and not allow the divisiveness of the current debate stem any progress.

According to the interviewees, the challenges that they face can be solved through a variety of means. Civil society development, taking control of the conversation about women in society, and education and cultural activities, were the main methods of countering the patriarchal attitudes that limit female participation in Tunisia. Feiza, as president of an NGO, was insistent on civil society's role in creating a forum for women and filling the void of women in party and governmental representation. Meriem agreed with this policy, for she said civil society will allow women, especially young women, to get the training and political maturity necessary to be effective leaders one day. It is through the continued promotion of these organizations that women will gain the necessary skills to be a true political force.

Additionally, Omezzine seeks to counter the culture of fear and passivity that has a hold over the majority of potential female leaders. Through the creation of a public debate and party outreach throughout the state, women can challenge the dominant discourse and prove to men, and passive women, that a female presence does have a strong and effective benefit on society. Jawhara agreed with this, but believes that the conversation should be grounded in traditional and religious values. She wants to use concepts from the Arab and Islamic value system, using the tools of misogyny against men and women who insist that women have no place in the public sphere. She cites Quranic history and Hadith literature to show that women have been in the public spotlight since the dawn of Islam. By using those sources against the patriarchal attitudes, she believes women can convince others of the public and political worth. Interestingly, Asma and Jolanare believed in the power of public discourse and educational campaigns to raise awareness, but they felt that the discourse will be limited if civil society focuses strictly on

gender issues. Human rights, they insist, should dominate the conversation, which will make the need for reform for pressing and relatable. Above all, these women want to be talked to, instead of talked about.

Additionally, Ines explained that cultural associations and social activities were the best source of social and cultural change, and that by altering inter-gender dynamics women can overcome the gender stereotypes. Through education and after-school activities, men and women can create normal, functioning working relationships, which will then transform into stronger political associations. She wants to reform the standard gender discourse and relationship to ensure egalitarian treatment from a young age, which will be transformative as Tunisian youth embark on familial and working relationships. Asma also was in support of this idea, citing ATFD's work on creating cultural organizations and cinema clubs for youth, which not only provide entertainment, but also educate them on human rights and women's issues. All of these methods garnered a wide range of support from all women involved in this project and have begun to be implemented by the various associations they are affiliated with. Rather than focus on strictly political activity, these women are challenging the status quo and undergoing an incremental process.

Ultimately, it is clear that there is a vibrant and vocal elite female activist community in Tunisia. While this research was not exhaustive and only centers around certain female activists in Tunisia, I hoped to gain, through my interviews, a better sense of the potential political inclusion for women in the future. These interviews provided a lot of information, as well as reinforced some assumptions I had prior to beginning this project. The concerns of elite activist women in Tunisia go beyond superficial, political concerns and are instead aimed at changing the Tunisian consciousness. As Tunisia begins to remake its identity and create a post-

revolutionary political space, women are gearing up to take their place as political leaders and contenders. All the women agreed that women can and will have a larger representation in politics, but now is not the time: women have other concerns that take precedence over political representation, there are social and cultural hurdles, and they do not yet have the experience necessary. Women's movements in Tunisia, as well as pro-democracy and civil society organizations, need to contend with a new and changing political environment, but in the end will hopefully gain their fair share of governmental representation.

Despite women's willingness to make their voices heard through NGOs, online, and in the streets, they do not yet have the confidence to challenge the status quo. It was interesting to see how many women I have spoken to pride themselves on their activism, but none of them wish to enter politics or run for a political party position. Even Jawhara said she did not feel like she was ready to be a viable candidate prior to the October 23 elections, and had to discuss her political prospects with her father, fiancée, and friends to dispel her concerns. The fact that there is a major disconnect between the activist ideology and the realization of these political goals is concerning. If women become too comfortable in their civil society and awareness roles, then there will not be an internal push to create a political space for themselves. Too many of the women I spoke to had excuses for the reasons why they did not wish to run, yet it is the internal lack of confidence and self-stopping that prevents women from finding their own personal political voice. Women need to not only combat the misogynistic discourse directed at them by men, but also overcome their own feelings of unworthiness.

The disgust towards politics is also a point of concern. While the current political discourse is disconcerting, women in general risk apathy if they focus solely on street activism and civil society development because they do not wish to associate themselves with the state.

Turning away from politics entirely creates an imbalanced political movement that will face more hurdles in the future. The women that these elite women reach out to are becoming increasingly apathetic and uninformed, thereby weakening the creation of a collective consciousness. Meriem explained that there are three types of young Tunisian women today: women who don't know what they want and are uninformed without clear goals; women who are passive and just want to maintain the status quo and who make up the majority; and women who are activists and take to the streets. Reaching out to these women and inspiring collective action with varying commitments is necessary to show that women are informed, empowered, and collective. I am hopeful that women like Jawhara, who have taken the plunge into politics, can serve as models for younger women and show that participating in government is worth all of the hurdles and baggage that accompanies it. In accordance with the cultural outreach and educational endeavors, reaching out and targeting this mentality is crucial to the development of a female political consciousness.

The limits of this project, and the women's movement in general, is that the women I spoke to were all upper-middle class Tunisian women who had access to higher education, job opportunities, and encompass the elite political woman. The varying lifestyles faced by women throughout Tunisia can create a disconnect between regional activists and possibly lead to elitism. While many of them are doing outreach to women in the south, through town-hall political meetings, creating office buildings of political parties and NGOs, and combating domestic violence, rural women are not included in the conversation and are instead talked about. In order to be effective, a major campaign needs to be undertaken to include rural women in the ranks and make activism available throughout all regions. Activism remains in the hands

of the elite women of Tunisia and until more opportunities are afforded to the poorer and less educated segments of Tunisia's female population, the movement will be seriously limited.

Analysis and Final Conclusions

Despite these challenges, these women believe they are ready and able to lead effectively in the future. They are not willing to let the current conversation deter them from realizing their political ambitions and are passionate about the work they are conducting. They understand the urgency surrounding this issue and it is a priority among the women's movement here in Tunisia and they have gained the autonomy that was denied them under the previous regimes. They view their prospects for inclusion with optimism, and while they do not believe they will be political candidates, they trust that from the work they are conducting now that one day women will have an equitable chance at true political inclusion. Civil society and other women's and human rights organizations have become essentially autonomous, providing them with greater leverage to make an impact. Finally, they recognize their own limitations in getting their message to the public. All of them expressed that they knew they made up the minority, that the majority of women in Tunisia did not understand politics or were not interested in being active on a deeper level. They have started the process of connecting with youth and targeting schools and cultural organizations to insert female political dialogue into the discourse. While apathy among young women remains a major concern, by networking, reaching out to new groups and associations, and interacting with these segments of society, more and more young women will hopefully become informed and inspired, ensuring a strong female base of political activity beyond street activism.

Instead of being concerned about the social discourse, these women have a strategy for creating effective change for women. While the statistics and conversation are disturbing, they

are not worried about losing rights and instead look at the current political transition as an opportunity to realize their political and social goals. Women are organized, and they have given themselves the position of cultural and social changers. Politics is the end goal for these women, but they are aware of the process needed to be undertaken to make this a reality. For the post-revolutionary elite Tunisian woman, political inclusion is not the priority; it is instead making an environment that is open and accessible for their peers and future leaders. Even though they are not included in official discourse, they are still promoting female candidates in office. All of the women I spoke to voted for a female candidate. This was not based upon credentials, party affiliation, or platform. These women wanted a true representative in office and while women continue to combat the challenges to female political inclusion, they have women in office ensuring their continued legislative protection. While the priority is within civil society activity, women still wish to increase female presence in government in the meantime.

Post-revolutionary women have obtained their own agency and have created their own methodological framework for change. Men are not dictating their political activity and goals for the future; instead they are choosing their place in Tunisian political society and are remaking their strategy so that it is long lasting, sustainable, and ensures a continued female presence at the highest posts of government. They are not being pushed out of politics entirely by men; many of these women choose to focus their efforts elsewhere. Women have chosen their current political activist track and there is a small, yet vocal and passionate group, willing to stand and further these aims. For the time being, women are more interested in reconciling the dominant cultural norms with the prospect of female leadership than actually instituting female candidates in political office. Women are focused on getting the proper training necessary to be viable candidates, and organizations are looking to get a diverse opinion.

There is a lot at stake for young female activists like those that I interviewed and they recognize the hurdles ahead of them. They need to convince women and men that they have the tenacity and ability to lead. Because they make up a minority, there is much work to be done; they will need to compensate for the apathy of their female peers and challenge the cultural status quo. Activist women have a much more important role than they realize: not only do they need to defend women's rights and continue to be progressive, but they also have to serve as role models and create the space necessary for their friends and family. They are facing challenges from all angles, but as long as they remain committed to their progressive ideals, creativity, and a belief in a common cause, women will have a strong mantle upon which they can ensure they are afforded equal space, representation, and input.

In this period of democratic transition, women have the opportunity to take agency over their political futures. A priority during this period of development needs to be female empowerment and women need to ensure that their voices are heard through their efforts. It is clear that despite the minority of women who make up the female activist community they are passionate and will have a strong impact on Tunisian post-revolutionary political development. Despite the challenges of a divisive political climate, these women participate fully within the post-revolutionary movement and have a greater opportunity to serve as harbingers of change.

Based upon the demonstrations, such as the Book Reading Protest on Avenue Bourgiba; April 9 demonstration; and May 1st activities I have witnessed, it is evident that women continue to take to the streets and will remain active in the near future. With these young leaders at the forefront of female mobilization, women have the chance to be at the head of cultural, civic, and social change. These young women seek to challenge the dominant discourse and create

prospects for political inclusion, and with their newfound agency and newly defined societal roles, women will strive to ensure their political and social goals are realized.

Bibliography:

Ajmi, Sana. "Women's Status in the Constituent Assembly." 28 October 2011. Tunisia Live. <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2011/10/28/women-status-in-the-constituent-assembly/>

Bensalem, Maria. Personal Interview. 20 April 2012.

Ben Othman, Souha. Personal Interview. 20 April 2012.

Boussedra, Raja. Lecture. March 13 2012.

Boussedra, Raja. Conversation. April 30 2012.

Clark, Jane Astrid and Jillian Scwedler. "Who Opened the Window? Women's Activism in Islamist Parties." *Comparative Politics*. Volume 35, No. 3 (April 2003), pages 293-312.

Dris-Ait- Hamadouche, Louisa. "Women in the Maghreb: Civil Society's Actors or Political Instruments?" *Middle East Policy*, Winter 2007. Volume 14, Issue 4. Pages 115-133.

Ettis, Jawhara. Personal Interview. 24 April 2012.

Fatnassi, Meriem. Personal Interview. 17 April 2012.

Ghrabib, Ines. Personal Interview. 24 April 2012.

Ghribi, Nadya. Conversation. March 15 2012.

Jolanare. Personal Interview. 19 April 2012.

Khelifa, Omezzine. Personal Interview. 18 April 2012.

Labidi, Lillia. "The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women's Associations in the Maghreb: The Case of AFTURD and ATFD in Tunisia." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Special Issue: Transnational Theory, National Politics, and Gender in the Contemporary Middle East/North Africa, Winter 2007, pages 6-34.

Lewis, Aiden. "Profile: Tunisia's Ennahda Party." BBC. 25 October 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15442859>

Mahmoud, Driria. *Tunisian Men and Women in Figures*. Center for Research, Documentation, and Information on Women. Signes. 2002.

Meherzi, Khadija. Conversation. March 1 2012.

Moatemri, Asma. Personal Interview. 18 April 2012.

Murphy, Emma C. "Women in Tunisia-Between State Feminism and Economic Reform" in *Women and Globalization in the Middle East: Gender, Economy, and Society*. Edited by Eleanor Abdella Doumato. Lynne Rienner Publishers. 2003.

Reuters. "Tunisia's Ennahda to Oppose Sharia in Constitution." Reuters. 26 March 2012.
<http://news.yahoo.com/tunisi-as-ennahda-oppose-sharia-constitution-112058311.html>

Oslo Freedom. "Lila Ben Mhenni." Oslo Freedom Forum.
http://www.oslofreedomforum.com/speakers/lina_ben_mhenni.html

The Tunisian Cultural and Information Center. "Women in Public Life."
http://www.tunisiancenterusa.com/pub_life.html

Skandriani, Feiza. Personal Interview. 14 April 2012.