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Exploring Women's Participation in Civic Life in Tunisia

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Introduction

For decades, Tunisian women have set a strong example of leadership across the Arab world. Freed from most social and cultural restrictions, Tunisian women helped build the country's future side by side with men during its first post-independence administration. While substantial, these advances in women's participation have not yet resulted in women's full inclusion in political and civic life, especially in rural areas of the country.¹

This report seeks to complement the Carter Center's previous findings on women's political engagement by exploring barriers to their participation in civil society. Together with the Tunisian Association for Integrity and Democracy of Elections (ATIDE), the Center facilitated a series of focus groups and in-depth interviews aimed at exploring the factors influencing women's participation in civic life, including their perceptions of civil society organizations, of themselves as agents of change, and of their role in civic life.

This report explores those perspectives and the role of women in Tunisian society. The focus groups found several challenges undermining women's participation and representation in civic life, including patriarchal traditions and beliefs, unemployment, personal finances, limited access to information, and dependence on men, especially in rural regions of the country. Many of the barriers identified in this round of focus groups were also identified in our [previous report on women's participation in political life](#) surrounding the 2019 national elections.

While many factors inhibit women's full participation, focus group findings suggest that they perceive civil society space as more accessible and trustworthy than the political sphere. Women participants said they feel more comfortable engaging with civil actors as doing so does not engender the same conflicts as politics. In addition, unlike politics, focus group participants said civil society activities have a tangible impact on citizens' lives and afford them the opportunity to improve their skills. During the focus group sessions, participants often mentioned the phrase "Wassal Soutek" (your voice needs to be heard) as a slogan for women to become involved in civic life while saying that this involvement is the best and most effective way for them to voice their opinions.

In contrast with the limited political development that has occurred in the past 10 years, Tunisian civil society has flourished since the country's 2011 revolution. According to the latest statistics in March 2021, there are 23,899 registered CSOs across the country, an increase from 9,500 associations in 2010. Twenty percent of the associations currently active are in Tunis (4,824). Cultural CSOs (19.69%, or 4,704 organizations) represent the most common type among the overall number.² The list of prominent CSOs working on women's issues includes: ATFD (Tunisian Association of Democratic Women), Asswat Nissaa (Voices of Women), TuMed (Tunisian-Mediterranean Center), LET (League of Women Voters), and BEITY (My Home).

¹ The Carter Center's report "Exploring Women's Participation in Political Life in Tunisia with a Focus on the 2019 Elections" https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/news/peace_publications/democracy/tunisia-gender-rpt-103020.pdf.

² Source: (FR) <http://www.ifeda.org.tn/stats/francais.pdf> / (AR) <http://www.ifeda.org.tn/stats/arabe.pdf>.

Despite a relatively small number of nationally known organizations working on women's rights, empowerment, and inclusion issues in Tunisia, women focus group participants appear to trust CSOs more than politics or politicians.³ The positive perception of CSOs and their work presents an untapped resource and opportunity to increase the role of women in Tunisian society. There is also a synergy between the skills women can learn by being involved in civic life and the skills necessary for being involved in politics. Once women have learned such skills, the likelihood that they would become involved in politics in the future should increase.

To harness this untapped resource and improve the leadership and organizational skills of women, regional CSOs need to be strengthened and focus on programs that encourage women to become involved in civic life. This includes expanding their outreach to women in rural regions, educating women on the roles they can play in civil society, providing greater opportunities for women to be involved in civic life, and providing skills training for women to fully engage in civil society.

Methodology and Approach

To explore women's participation in associational and public life, The Carter Center partnered with ELKA Consulting (ELKA) and the Tunisian Association for Integrity and Democracy of Elections (ATIDE) to hold focus groups in four cities covering four regions of the country: North West/Kef, North East/Sousse, South West/Gafsa, and South East/Sfax. All participants were women who were registered voters and self-identified as either currently active, previously active, or inactive in civic society or politics, including as members of political parties. The groups were divided into three target groups of participants: inactive women between the ages of 18 and 35, inactive women over the age of 35, and active women between the ages of 18 and 35.

ELKA, in consultation with The Carter Center, developed a recruitment survey and guidelines to select focus group participants (Annex B). Participants in all sessions were pre-screened to ensure diversity of location, education level, and occupation. Topics included social, economic, and political issues facing participants in their communities, relationship to political elites and institutions, barriers to inclusion in registration and voting, interaction with campaigns and candidates, and women in politics. The focus groups were moderated by two members of ATIDE who had previously been trained in moderation techniques by The Carter Center and ELKA. All of the group sessions were conducted in Tunisian Arabic. After the sessions, the moderators, project staff, and program manager contributed to the research analysis, assessment of key findings, and recommendations.

All efforts were made to ensure that no outside influence was exerted on participants. The moderation guide was not shared with any local authorities, and venues were chosen to facilitate remote observation by Carter Center staff, ensuring the privacy of participants. Apart from expected regional variation, findings from the groups were similar enough to reach iteration and ensure that no undue external influence had been exerted.

³ In Tunisia, the number of CSOs working in women's issues is limited. There are 23,456 registered civil associations, including those active on a national, regional, or local level. Of all registered organizations, only 0.88% are registered as working on women's issues. Most are charitable organizations that do not work on issues of women's rights, empowerment, or inclusion.

For each session, 30 potential participants were invited to participate in the discussion in order to guarantee at least 10 participants meeting the target characteristics were present to participate in each focus group.⁴ Participants in each session represented different categories of society (unemployed, employed, students, etc.) and were from different areas of the selected region. ELKA and Carter Center representatives attended each session as well. The moderator used a moderation guide prepared by ELKA and revised by The Carter Center (Annex B).

Timeline – 12 Focus Groups in Total



In addition to the series of focus groups, 12 in-depth individual interviews were conducted with women leaders from government, parliament, municipal councils, the Independent High Authority for Elections (known by its French acronym, ISIE), the Court of Accounts, and civil society. Questions were developed for each interview depending on the particular expertise or field of the women being interviewed and the information gathered from the focus groups.

Legal Framework for Women’s Participation in Civic Life

Before the revolution, women’s rights were enhanced by the promulgation of the Personnel Status Code (PSC) in 1956, which prohibited polygamy and repudiation and favored consensual marriage and equality during divorce procedures. The PSC was amended several times in subsequent years, reinforcing the rights of women, especially within the family, and their participation in the management of matters affecting children. Additional amendments to the labor code, as well as the penal code, also strengthened women's rights in Tunisia.

Tunisia has ratified several treaties concerning women’s rights, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1985 and the optional protocol to CEDAW in 2008. In 1986, Tunisia ratified the Convention of the International Labor Organization on equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value.

With regard to women's rights more particularly, the Tunisian constitution guarantees equal opportunities between women and men for access to various responsibilities in all fields. Article 46 sets a goal that “the state works to attain parity between women and men in elected Assemblies.” However, there is no obligation for the state to mandate gender parity. The parliament is responsible for passing legislation to implement this aspirational goal.

To achieve more equitable participation of women in parliament, the electoral law calls for the alternation of male and female candidates in electoral lists, but it does not mandate that women

⁴ There was a minimum of 10 participants in all sessions except for one in Kef for the category (active/-35), where there were only nine participants. See Annex 1 for details of participants for each region.

head the lists.⁵ Of the 220 political parties that formed after the revolution, only three had women as leaders.⁶

The evolution of civil society in Tunisia

Tunisian civil society has experienced three distinct evolutionary stages since the country's independence in 1956.⁷ The concept of civil society was almost nonexistent for the majority of Prime Minister and President Habib Bourguiba's tenure from 1956 to 1987. Although Bourguiba is credited with modernizing Tunisia, he did not permit the growth of liberal democracy. Political opposition, especially from the left, was suppressed and civil society was virtually absent, with the exception of the Tunisian General Labor Union (known by its French acronym, UGTT), which continued to survive under his premiership and, later, presidency.

At the end of the 1970s, the idea of human rights for all citizens began to spread in Tunisia with the creation of the Tunisian League for Human Rights (known by its French acronym, LTDH) in 1977. This organization eventually played a key role in the resistance against the dictatorship of both the Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali regimes.

The Bourguiba era ended following the coup orchestrated by Ben Ali in 1987. In November 1988, the center-left, liberal, and Islamist movement political leaders signed a "National Pact," creating a national unity government. Its platform obligated the government to defend women's rights and support the reform of school curricula, particularly as it related to religious education.

After taking power, Ben Ali took increasingly authoritarian steps to consolidate his power, exerting increasing control over civil society with the support of the police and judicial branch. The government also appointed its representatives at the head of recalcitrant associations. Some organizations such as the LTDH, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (known by its French acronym, ATFD), the National Union of Journalists (known by its French acronym, SNJT), as well as the sectoral branches of the UGTT, continued to campaign for democratic freedoms despite threats, bans, and violence.

Despite these pressures, in the three years following Ben Ali's coup against Bourguiba, 2,845 associations were created, an increase of 144%. By 2010, the number of associations had reached more than 9,500.⁸ Most of these associations were of a cultural and artistic nature (63%), followed by sports associations (13%). Charitable and benevolent associations accounted for only 5% of the total.⁹

The 2011 fall of Ben Ali was a major turning point in the history of Tunisian civil society. Not unlike the change in the aftermath of the 1987 coup, the 2011 transition brought about an explosion

⁵ Electoral Law, Article 25

⁶ Carter Center, 2020 Gender Report

⁷ DJEBALI Taoufik, "*La société civile tunisienne à l'épreuve de la révolution*," *Recherches internationales*, n° 104, July-September 2015, pp. 67-88. Source: <https://www.recherches-internationales.fr/RI104/RI104Djebali.pdf>

⁸ DJEBALI Taoufik, "*La société civile tunisienne à l'épreuve de la révolution*," *op.cit.*, p. 74.

⁹ IFEDA is a French acronym for "Le centre d'information, de formation, d'études et de documentation sur les associations" (The Center for Information, Training, Studies and Documentation on Associations), created in 2000 for the purpose of collecting information on associations and facilitating their work.

in the number of associations. In an atmosphere of revolutionary euphoria and a break with the past, the number of associations increased, according to the IFEDA Information Center, from 9,969 in 2010 to 23,899 by March 2021.

Two main areas of growth were organizations invested in human rights and religion, both of which were prohibited under the Ben Ali regime. This expansion has been accompanied by a stronger involvement of young people and women. Civil society has become much younger and especially more appealing to women, at least in the Greater Tunis area and other urban areas across the country. The same demographic showed a great interest in elections and election monitoring and the desire to be involved in politics after decades of oppression.¹⁰

According to the latest available statistics in March 2021, there are 23,899 registered CSOs across the country; 20% of these associations are active in Tunis (4,824). Cultural CSOs (19.69%, or 4,704 organizations) represent the most common type among the overall number.¹¹ The list of prominent CSOs working on women's issues includes: ATFD (Tunisian Association of Democratic Women), Asswat Nissaa (Voices of Women), TuMed (Tunisian-Mediterranean Center), LET (League of Women Voters), and BEITY (My Home).¹²

Focus Group Findings

While many factors inhibit women's full participation in political and associative activities, focus group findings suggest that women perceive civil society space as more accessible and trustworthy than the political sphere. Women participants said they feel more comfortable engaging with civil actors, as it does not engender the same conflicts as politics. In addition, unlike politics, focus group participants said civil society activities have a tangible impact on citizens' lives and afford them the opportunity to improve their skills. That said, participants outlined many factors, including patriarchal traditions and beliefs, unemployment, personal finances, limited access to information, and dependence on men, especially in rural regions of the country, that inhibit their full participation in civic life.

Women's engagement in politics is limited

The participation of women in post-revolution political life in Tunisia began with a strong presence in the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), where they played an important role.¹³ Nearly one-quarter of NCA deputies were women, several of whom assumed leadership roles in the NCA's work to draft and pass the constitution. Tunisia has since experienced a decrease in women's representation in elected office; focus group participants attributed this dynamic to three main reasons: women's perception of politics, society's perception of women in politics, and women's

¹⁰ There are 17 categories under which a CSO can register. They are: 1. Scientific, 2. Women, 3. Sports, 4. "Amicale," 5. Cultural-artistic, 6. Social-charity, 7. Developmental, 8. Small loans, 9. Schools, 10. Environmental, 11. Legal, 12. Citizenship, 13. Youth, 14. Children, 15. Foreign, 16. Networking, 17. Coordination.

¹¹ Source: (FR) <http://www.ifeda.org.tn/stats/francais.pdf> / (AR) <http://www.ifeda.org.tn/stats/arabe.pdf>
Consulted on April 1, 2021.

¹² See Annex A for breakdown of number of CSOs in certain governates.

¹³ Elected in 2011, the NCA drafted and passed the 2014 constitution. A law requiring gender parity on party lists for the NCA election resulted in a high number of women elected to office. Of the 214 deputies, 24% were women.

perception of women leaders in politics. This contrasts with women's participation in civil society, which has seen an increase since the revolution.

Unlike involvement in civic life, the general perception of focus group participants was that being involved in politics generally requires a lot of work that is unappreciated and exposes them to violence. In addition, they said women in rural areas do not have sufficient information about politics and how it can affect their daily lives or those of fellow citizens. One constant sentiment was that politicians lie and do not follow through on the promises they make during campaigns. Participants said women would prefer to be as far away as possible from that environment.

Focus group participants said that when they compete for a political position within the party or within institutions, they become a target to be eliminated, which is why they felt that access to political parties was easy but attaining higher positions on the political ladder and reaching positions of power in parties remain difficult. In civil society, women hold many high-level positions.

As a woman former member of the ISIE remarked:

“In politics, women need to work on themselves; they should be always present and accept the risk to be subject of attacks and critics.” She added, “Women need to be strengthened by joining a group. Women tend to work alone and lead battles alone, which makes their tasks more difficult. Men in general and in particular in politics always work in groups; this gives them more strength and power.”

As with participation in civic life, the perception of politics from the participants' perspective can vary from one region to another, but one common link between the different regions and categories is that women are not encouraged to be active in politics, they face more challenges being members of political parties, and they are met with a real challenge accessing higher political positions. The cultural habits of certain regions hamper the will of women to join politics.

Women are more comfortable engaging in civic life than in politics

Women's engagement in civil society activities is visible throughout the country, according to participants in the 12 focus groups. Participants shared their view that being involved in civil associations gives them an outlet to be heard by officials and the administration. The keyword used by all participants in the different regions was “Wassal Soutek,” which roughly translates to “make your voice heard.” For women, acting in associations is more effective as it allows them to be more confident that their voices will be heard by officials.

“I tried to get information from the municipality for a while, so I drafted an access to information request, but it got me nowhere. But when an association does it for us, it works; they get answers.”

- Woman in Gafsa (active/-35)

Although women face some of the same problems in the associative sphere as they do in politics, participants said civil society is a more favorable environment for women to start their activism and join public life, as it definitely gives more opportunity for women to grow and develop skills. Many of these skills can be transferred to political life.

During the in-depth interviews, a female activist from Jeunesse Sans Frontières (JSF) said the presence of political parties in rural areas of Tunisia is visible only during election campaigns because many parties have serious organizational problems with no steady source of funding and no structure to maintain a popular base between electoral periods. However, the activities of civil society are present through various projects throughout the year, which creates a lasting and continuous relationship between citizens and these organizations.

To take advantage of CSOs' presence in rural areas throughout the year, The Carter Center encourages civil society to increase activities focused on outreach and engagement of women in civic life.

Women view civil society as more accessible than politics, but cultural barriers remain

According to focus group participants in all regions, people trust civil society organizations more than they trust politicians, and CSOs have a higher concentration of women involved in their activities. In the four regions, most participants confirmed that women have better access to civil society than to politics mainly because CSOs are more patient, welcoming and predisposed to helping people.

However, in very conservative areas of the country, even becoming active in civil society is frowned upon for women.

"I faced difficulties at first as my father was against my participation in a training and that I go to a hotel for four days."

- Activist from Tunisian Mediterranean Center

The higher participation of women in civil society is linked to CSOs' proximity and continuous presence where women live.

"Civil society is more present in the field than political parties."

- Activist from Jeunesse Sans Frontières (JSF)

Many participants said their parents believe CSO activism is a waste of time as they view it as a "hobby" having no practical or economic value to the family, whereas the parents' priority is for young women (and men) to study, get a degree, find a job and start making money. This mind-set has started to shift in the last few years, especially as older generations realize that civil society activism can also be an employment sector.

The gender perspective looks at the impact of gender on people's opportunities, social roles, and interactions. Successful implementation of the policy, program, and project goals of international and national organizations is directly affected by the impact of gender and, in turn, influences the process of social development. Gender is an integral component of every aspect of the economic, social, daily, and private lives of individuals and societies, and of the different roles society ascribes to men and women. In a policy context, taking a gender perspective is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic, and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.

In order to take advantage of the positive perception of participation in civil society, as opposed to participation in politics, CSOs should seek to increase their visibility in rural areas of the country with a focus on educating both men and women on the added value CSOs bring to society and why taking a gender perspective is good for society.

Women view participation in civic life as having more impact on daily life

Participants also found that the general mood in CSOs is nonjudgmental and there is no stereotyping of women, unlike in politics. Women also enjoy the feeling of having an impact and helping to change people's lives directly, without any promises or long-term expectations. Focus group participants who are active in CSOs confirmed that activities with civil society improved their skills, including public speaking and networking, which helped them become stronger and more independent.

"The experience with civil society taught me independence and professionalism. I'm active in 10 different associations."

- Woman in Sfax (active/-35)

In general, participants in the 12 focus groups felt more confident being active in civil society. Most had friends, neighbors, and family members who are active in civil society who served as role models for them.

The opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with other women effectuated real change in the minds and behaviors of many women. Under the social restrictions of conservative regions, women do not have many opportunities to meet people outside their families, making them dependent on the men in the family. Civil society activities give them the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas and improve their skills in a nonthreatening environment.

CSOs should increase the visibility of women active in their organizations to provide positive role models for other women and break down cultural barriers to women's participation.

The traditional view of women's role in family life creates time constraints for women to participate in civic life

Being active in civil society takes time, and when women work and have a family, it is difficult to make time for activities outside the home. The responsibility for the home and the children generally falls to women in Tunisian society. In Kef and Gafsa, participants agreed that activities with CSOs required time and that men are freer to engage in CSO activities because they have more free time, whereas women's time is always limited by their domestic responsibilities.

"My salary is too low and I work long hours, so I don't have the luxury to join an association."

- Woman in Kef, (inactive/-35)

"Women work two jobs (at home and outside) while the man isn't required to do anything at home."

- Woman in Gafsa (inactive/-35)

The burden of domestic responsibilities, which are rarely shared in Tunisian households, combined with the need for some women to work outside the home, is an obstacle to active participation in civil society. CSOs should devise more creative and flexible ways to engage with women within the time constraints they face.

Women lack information or opportunity to join an association

In Kef, Sousse, and Gafsa, participants across six of the focus groups who were inactive expressed a lack of information about civil society organizations and that no opportunities were presented for them to join associations. Many of these women were willing to volunteer and want to be active to add value to society, but they do not have the opportunities to join associations.

“We do not even hear about existing associations. No one guides you to an association or invites you to participate and attend a meeting. Now that my children have grown up, I have time and I would like to become active with an association.”

- Woman in Kef (inactive/35+)

“There was never opportunity. We would if encouraged.”

- Woman in Sousse (inactive/-35)

From the focus groups, it is clear that there is an untapped reservoir of women willing to get involved in CSO work if they possessed the necessary information and had the opportunity to do so. There are many barriers, including lack of information and contacts, and even cultural habits for certain regions. In addition, as women become more active in civic life, they will be better positioned through new skills and more information to challenge the familial constraints they face.

To take advantage of the untapped reservoir of women willing to participate in civic life, CSOs should increase their outreach activities and consider holding educational meetings, especially in rural areas, to tell women how to access and engage in civil society.

Challenges to Women’s Participation in Civic Life

1. Women’s Unemployment

The level of women’s unemployment has a direct effect on their ability and willingness to become engaged in civic life. Financial independence is one of the keys to women’s ability to make decisions about their lives and be active outside the home, including in civil society organizations. If women feel more secure in their and their family’s economic situation, they are more likely to engage in external activities.

The Tunisian Constitution guarantees the right to work for both men and women without any distinction or discrimination.¹⁴ However, the reality in the working environment in Tunisia is sometimes different. According to the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), the unemployment rate

¹⁴ Article 40 of the Tunisian Constitution states that work is a right for every citizen, male and female. The state shall take the necessary measures to guarantee work on the basis of competence and fairness. All citizens, male and female, shall have the right to decent working conditions and to a fair wage.

for women during the first quarter of 2020 was 22%, well above the 12.3% rate of men. For graduates of higher education, the gap between the two genders is wider, with 38.1% of women graduates unemployed compared to male graduates at 15.7%.

In the different focus groups, all participants talked about unemployment in their regions. Participants in Kef and Gafsa were more affected by unemployment. According to NIS rates for the second quarter of 2019, the unemployment rate in Gafsa was 25.5%, while in Kef it was 17.8%. Meanwhile in Sousse and Sfax it was 10.2% and 10.7% respectively.¹⁵

“The north-west region is heavily marginalized — no new business, no factories, no jobs.”

- Woman in Kef (inactive/-35)

According to participants, nothing has been done about the north-west area’s dismal economy and poor health care facilities. For them, employment needs to be the political parties’ biggest priority, and they should present solutions to create jobs.

“The unemployment rate is high, especially for the highly educated.”

- Woman in Gafsa (inactive/35+)

The situation of unemployment of women graduates makes them pessimistic and denies them the opportunity to actively contribute to the country’s development. The lack of employment opportunities is perceived by participants as a major failure of the revolution, which was driven in part by unemployed youth.

“The only gain from the revolution is democracy and a little bit of free speech.”

- Woman in Sfax (inactive/-35)

“No one is listening to what the youth want and need.”

- Woman in Kef (inactive/-35)

The COVID-19 health crisis has complicated the economic situation in Tunisia, in particular the tourism sector, which represents 14.2% of GDP for 2019.¹⁶ For participants in Sousse, a city that relies heavily on the tourism sector, COVID-19 severely damaged the economy. According to participants in Sousse, the lack of tourism and the direct and indirect employment it creates has led to an increase in criminal activity, especially robberies, and a general sense of insecurity in the city.

“Youth are using irregular (illegal) migration, there are no jobs, crime [increased], and women are afraid to go out even during the day.”

- Woman in Sousse (active/-35)

¹⁵ INS, Employment and unemployment indicators Second quarter 2019.

http://www.ins.tn/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/Note_ENPE_2T2019_F2.pdf

¹⁶ KPMG Tunisie, <https://home.kpmg/tn/fr/home/insights/2019/11/quelle-est-la-place-du-tourisme.html>

For some participants, being active in civil society requires a comfortable economic situation with employment almost a necessity. Paradoxically, being active in associations can be a way to improve women's skills and allow them more opportunities for employment.

The economic situation of the entire population has deteriorated, and the situation for women is even worse. Even though some of the regions are doing better economically, the situation for women in the four regions is essentially the same. Women's financial independence is the key to women's gaining the power to make decisions and be active outside the home, including in civil society organizations.

The Carter Center encourages CSOs to develop programs and trainings to educate women on how to overcome the barriers to their full participation in society and take advantage of the rights and commitments that Tunisia has agreed to.

2. Uneven Application of Existing Commitments

Tunisian women have long been perceived as enjoying more rights than other women in the Arab world. Habib Bourguiba, for all his faults, was seen as a pioneer in establishing equality between men and women, especially through the passage of the Personal Status Code (PSC) in 1956.¹⁷ The PSC was amended several times to improve women's rights.¹⁸

Among the focus groups, despite acknowledgement that the PSC generally improved the rights of women, participants felt that women in rural areas did not fully enjoy its effects. Many said these rights existed only "on paper" and had never been fully implemented outside of urban areas. According to participants, women work harder than men in all aspects of life, be it at home or externally. In different areas and among different categories of women, all said they had to manage a balance between their home, work, and raising children at all times while men did not have to deal with this reality.

According to participants, the situation of women in rural areas is less favorable than that of women in urban areas; they said they are still oppressed and must settle for jobs with a reduced salary, which men would never accept.

Tunisia ratified the International Labor Organization Convention on equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value in 1986, and the Tunisian labor code clearly specifies that there can be no discrimination between men and women, but there is still a gap between the law and reality.¹⁹ According to many participants, men and women may have the same rights on paper, but, in reality, women don't get paid the same as men for doing the same job, particularly in rural areas.

¹⁷ The main provisions of the Code include notably abolishing polygamy (Article 18), creating a legal procedure for divorce (Article 31) and only authorizing marriage with the mutual consent of both spouses (article 3).

¹⁸ One of the most important amendments was the mother's compulsory consent for the marriage of her minor child (Article 6). In addition, the text requires spouses to treat each other with "benevolence" and to help each other in the management of the household (Article 23).

¹⁹ Labor Code, Article 5 bis — There can be no discrimination between men and women in the application of the provisions of this Code and the texts adopted for its application.

“Educated women can do anything — they have rights, they can fly planes and go places — but rural women can’t; some of them suffer from violent husbands. They take their money. They don’t let them achieve anything.”

- Woman in Gafsa (inactive/35+)

“Men are paid twice our salaries for the same job in the factory where I work.”

- Woman in Sfax (inactive/-35)

Women in rural regions of Tunisia have less economic opportunity than those in urban areas and suffer more from unequal pay. They also feel that even though the law may demand equal rights and opportunity, they do not benefit from the law. Many expressed the need for government to educate employers on and enforce current provisions on equality of pay.

The Carter Center encourages the government to adopt measures to reduce the gender disparity in employment and address the pay gap between men and women, including greater enforcement of existing legal provisions guaranteeing equal pay.

3. Regional culture and social pressure

Although Tunisia is recognized as a leader in giving women equal rights in the law, culture and society have not yet achieved equality. This creates a dichotomy where women have certain legal rights but in reality are still subject to the cultural norms of a society that frowns upon women taking on certain roles or behaving in a certain way.

“Society allows men to make mistakes, but the same doesn’t apply for women. Even when a woman participates in the household expenses, it becomes an acquired right.”

- Woman in Sfax (inactive/-35)

Women said they are always limited and bound more than men by tradition and culture, especially in rural areas. This applies even when the law declares that the rights of women and men are equal. One area where this is especially true is divorce, which is seen as acceptable for men but stigmatizes women.

“Ever since I got divorced, I lost faith in society and isolated myself due to the pressure I felt. I could’ve opened my own business and created jobs, but society was too harsh on me as a divorcee.”

- Woman in Sfax (inactive/-35)

In Kef and Gafsa more than in Sfax and Sousse, women’s discussions focused on the practical challenges and obstacles that women face every day that prevent them from being active in civic and political life. Local societal traditions forbidding women from going out late at night and time constraints created by the traditional role women play in family life prevent them from participating in civic and political activities that take place at the end of the day.

The privilege of men compared to women in certain activities like politics is very visible even within the same family. In Gafsa, families and parents usually don't let women join politics or participate in political or civic events. One participant said:

“My father didn't let me join Afek Tounes even though my brother did join them and remained active with them.”

- Woman in Gafsa (inactive/-35)

4. Domestic Violence

On July 26, 2017, the parliament adopted a comprehensive law on the elimination of violence against women, constituting a major step forward for the legal protection of women's rights and the effort to stop domestic violence. Women face two types of violence: everyday street crime and family or domestic violence, which is usually targeted toward women. Both types of violence add to the challenges for women to be active in civic and political life. Some participants said their sense of personal security had deteriorated since the revolution.

Participants in Sousse and Gafsa raised security concerns and said women in the city are afraid to leave their homes by day or night.

“We are not safe anymore; people are getting mugged left and right. You simply fear for your safety. Women and children nowadays are more targeted by violence.”

- Woman in Gafsa (inactive/-35)

In general, when a woman wants to file a police report against her husband for domestic violence or alimony, she is judged for doing so and her family will try to dissuade her.

“When I sued my ex-husband for violence, the judge ripped up my lawsuit request and she told me to go back to my husband, complaining how every woman nowadays is going to have a piece of paper hanging over her husband's head.”

- Woman in Sfax (inactive/-35)

“We are going backwards; we're not advancing in anything. It was better before the revolution; at least we felt secure.”

- Woman in Gafsa (inactive/35+)

Violence is another obstacle keeping women home and making them feel less confident of engaging in civil or political activities. Women are increasingly the target of criminal activity and domestic violence and do not receive support from their families to combat these dynamics. This insecure environment deprives women of opportunities to participate in partisan or associative activities.

Civil society needs to work more with women in rural areas through awareness campaigns to inform them of their rights and how to seek legal redress, especially in matters of domestic violence and equality of opportunity.

Conclusion

Although women have a desire to participate in civic life — more so than in politics — the focus groups showed that many of the existing barriers to women’s political participation, including patriarchal traditions and beliefs, unemployment, personal finances, limited access to information, and dependence on men, also prevent them from becoming actively involved in civic life. However, it is clear from the focus groups that women believe that the barriers to participation in civic life can be more easily overcome.

Participants said there is more value in being involved in the latter, as they perceive civil society activities as having a more positive impact on their daily lives than politics. Involvement in civic life is also seen as less threatening and amenable to the cultural traditions and expectations of women in Tunisian society than involvement in politics, which is still viewed as a man’s activity.

Besides providing women in rural regions with new skill sets and better education about their rights and how to exercise them, greater involvement by women in civic life would provide more confidence and the skills needed to increase the role of women in politics. Many of the skills women learn by being active in civic life are transferable to involvement in politics. Being active in civic life is seen by many as a conduit to women’s greater involvement in political life in Tunisia.

As this report and the previous report on women’s participation in politics show, women have a desire to be involved in the social fabric of Tunisian society and to take advantage of new rights and opportunities that have arisen since the 2011 revolution. Participation in civic life is a natural conduit for women to begin to have a greater voice in the direction of Tunisian society and democracy and eventually a greater role in the political life of the country.

Recommendations

TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS:

1. Take advantage of rural women’s desire to be more active in civic life by encouraging them to become involved in civil society organizations and thereby improve their communication and organizational skills.
2. To take advantage of the positive perception of participation in civil society, as opposed to participation in politics, CSOs should seek to increase their visibility in rural areas of the country with a focus on educating both men and women on the added value CSOs bring to society and why taking a gender perspective is good for society.
3. CSOs should devise more creative and flexible ways to engage with women and encourage them to become active in civic life, taking into account their family roles and time constraints.
4. Undertake awareness campaigns targeting women in rural areas on CSO activities with a focus on enhancing women’s participation in civic life while addressing the cultural and economic differences between rural and urban areas.

5. Civil society needs to work more with women in rural areas through awareness campaigns to inform them of their rights and ways to seek legal redress, including in the areas of equal pay, domestic violence, and equality of opportunity.
6. Reduce barriers to women's participation in civic life by implementing cultural awareness campaigns in schools to enhance respect for women's rights among youth.
7. Develop programs and trainings to educate women on how to overcome the barriers to their full participation in society and take advantage of the rights and commitments to which Tunisia has agreed.

TO PARLIAMENT:

1. Conduct training for members of parliament to sensitize them to issues affecting women and the existing legal provisions mandating equality between the sexes.
2. Encourage members of parliament to organize community forums and town hall-like meetings to engage women in their communities and to bolster their participation in civic life.
3. Ensure that the gender perspective is taken into account by all parliamentary committees when considering all legislation through the solicitation of comments from CSOs working on gender issues.

TO GOVERNMENT:

Adopt measures to reduce the gender disparity in unemployment and address the pay gap between men and women including greater enforcement of existing legal provisions guaranteeing equal pay.

ANNEX A: Focus Group Implementation

I. Focus Group Schedule

Region	City	Date	Target groups
North-West	Le Kef	7/21/2020	Registered, ≤ 35 , didn't participate in 2018 and 2019 elections, not active in civil society or political parties
			Registered, ≥ 35 , didn't participate in 2018 and 2019 elections, not active in civil society or political parties
		7/22/2020	Registered, ≤ 35 , participated in 2019 elections, active in civil society or political parties
North-East	Sousse	7/23/2020	Registered, ≤ 35 , didn't participate in 2018 and 2019 elections, not active in civil society or political parties
			Registered, ≥ 35 , didn't participate in 2018 and 2019 elections, not active in civil society or political parties
		7/24/2020	Registered, ≤ 35 , participated in 2019 elections, active in civil society or political parties
South-West	Gafsa	8/8/2020	Registered, ≤ 35 , didn't participate in 2018 and 2019 elections, not active in civil society or political parties
			Registered, ≥ 35 , didn't participate in 2018 and 2019 elections, not active in civil society or political parties
		8/9/2020	Registered, ≤ 35 , participated in 2019 elections, active in civil society or political parties
South-East	Sfax	8/10/2020	Registered, ≤ 35 , didn't participate in 2018 and 2019 elections, not active in civil society or political parties
			Registered, ≥ 35 , didn't participate in 2018 and 2019 elections, not active in civil society or political parties
		8/11/2020	Registered, ≤ 35 , participated in 2019 elections, active in civil society or political parties

II. Focus Group Statistical data

Total Focus Groups

City	Nb. of FG	Women (≤ 35)	Women (≥ 35)	Total participants
Le Kef	3	19	10	29
Sousse	3	20	10	30
Gafsa	3	20	10	30
Sfax	3	20	11	31
Total	12	79	41	120

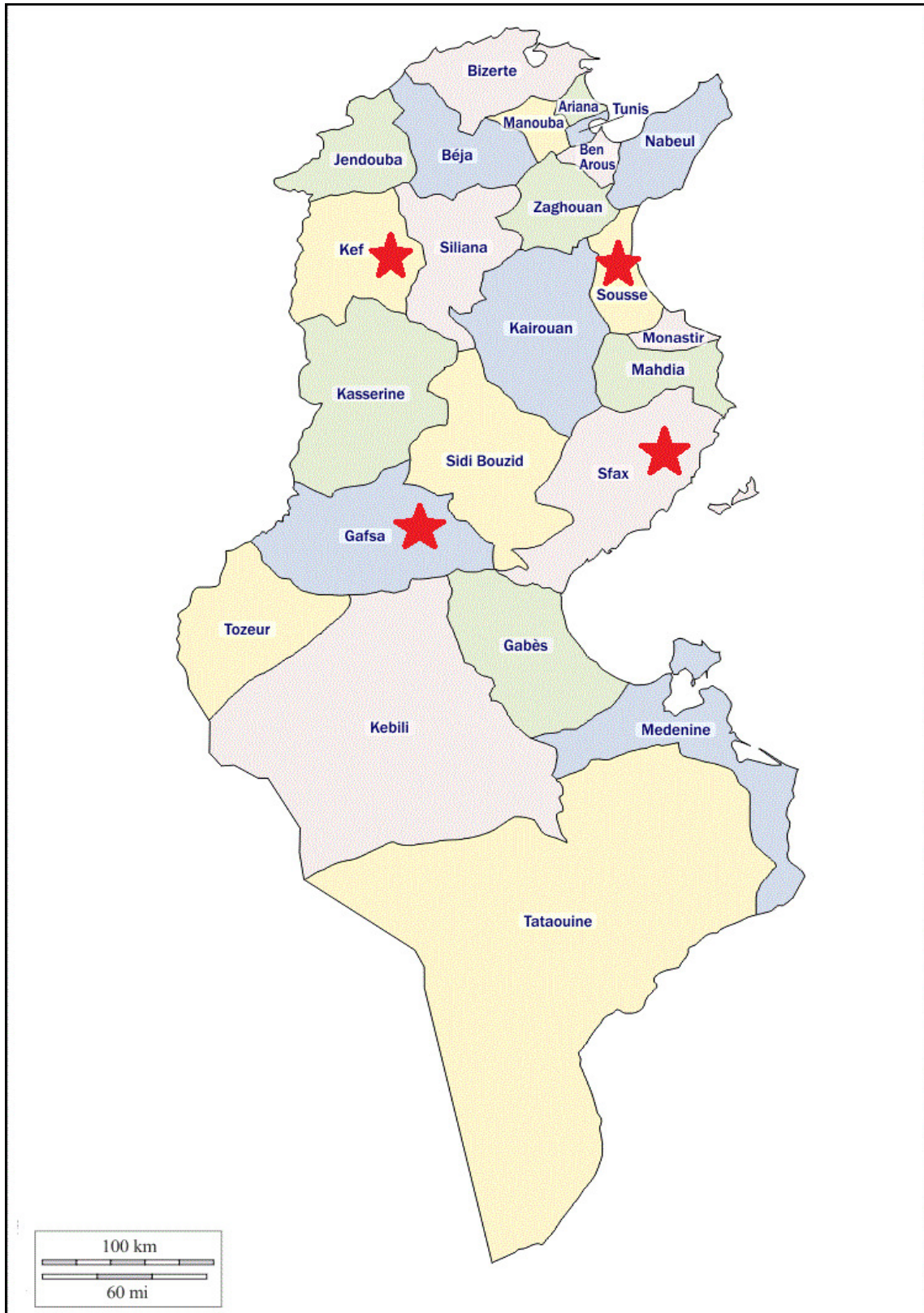
Active Women

City	Nb. of FG	Women (≤ 35)	Women (≥ 35)	Total participants
Le Kef	1	9	0	9
Sousse	1	10	0	10
Gafsa	1	10	0	10
Sfax	1	10	0	10
Total	4	39	0	39

Inactive Women

City	Nb. of FG	Women (≤ 35)	Women (≥ 35)	Total participants
Le Kef	2	9	10	19
Sousse	2	10	10	20
Gafsa	2	10	10	20
Sfax	2	10	11	21
Total	8	39	41	80

III. Map of Focus Group Locations



ANNEX B: Moderation Guide (Sample Questions)

FOCUS GROUPS' MODERATION GUIDE **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ASSOCIATIVE AND POLITICAL LIFE**

PART I: GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. Do you think the country is going on the right track?
 - a. What do you think is going right / What do you think is going wrong?
2. What are the main problems in the country?
 - a. Who is responsible for these problems?
3. Describe the main problems in your region in one word.
 - a. Who is responsible for these problems?
4. You talked about the politicians' and local officials' responsibility. Can you elaborate on the citizens' responsibility?
 - a. Go in depth:
 - b. How do citizens share this responsibility?
 - c. What's the solution, in your opinion?
5. Let's talk about your personal responsibility. Do you have any responsibility in all this?
 - a. How? Go in depth.
 - b. What did you do? What could you have done but didn't do?
6. Exercise: Imagine Tunisia as a woman. How would you describe her? (Age, profession, personality, physical appearance, etc.)
 - a. Step one: Describe this woman before the revolution. How was she?
 - b. Step two: Describe this woman immediately after the revolution. How did she change after 2011?
 - c. Step three: Describe this woman now. What did she become?
 - d. Step four: How do you see this woman in the next few years?

PART II: PERSONAL QUESTIONS

7. Were you registered to vote during previous elections?
 - a. How did you register to vote?
 - b. How did you decide to register?
 - c. Was it your personal decision to register?
 - i. If not, who encouraged you to register?
8. Did you ever vote?
 - a. When?
 - b. How did you decide for whom to cast your vote? (without mentioning the choice)
 - i. Step 1: Spontaneous answers.
 - ii. Step 2: Cite examples:
 - Registration campaign in your neighborhood
 - Publicity
 - A candidate you're familiar with
 - A political party you're familiar with
 - A televised debate
 - Advice from a father, a mother or a relative
 - Random choice
 - c. Did you regret your decision (to vote or abstain)? And why?
 - d. If elections are to be held next month, will you vote?
 - i. If yes, why?
 - ii. If not, why?
9. Have you ever participated in a political party's meeting or activity (without naming the party), or have you ever been affiliated with a political party?
 - a. If yes, why? What encouraged you to do so? How was your experience?
 - b. If no, what discouraged you from doing so?
10. Have you ever participated in a societal or associative activity? Or have you ever been a member of an association?
 - a. If yes, why? What encouraged you to do so?
 - b. If not, what discouraged you from doing so?
11. In your opinion, who is responsible for the elections' results? Those who voted or those who abstained? Why?
12. In your opinion, how can you participate in decision making in the country, in your region and in your town?
 - a. Step one: Spontaneous answers.
 - b. Step two: Cite examples:
 - i. Voting
 - ii. Participation in civil society
 - iii. Participation in a political party
 - iv. Protests
 - v. Signing petitions
 - vi. Strikes
 - vii. Communicating with local/regional/national officials

PART III: WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN ASSOCIATIVE AND POLITICAL LIFE

13. In your opinion, what's the woman's fundamental role in society?
14. How can a woman achieve this role? What are the means allowing her to do so?
15. Do you think women are capable to push for change in Tunisia, just like men?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. If not, why?
16. Do you think that women have the same rights as men?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. If not, why?
17. Do you think women still require support from society? Why?
18. Do you think women are less corrupt than men? (E.g.: less likely to accept a bribe)
19. What role can a woman play on the professional level?
 - a. Can women play a political role?
 - i. How? Why?
 - b. Do you think this applies to you personally?
 - i. If yes, why?
 - ii. If not, why?
 - iii. How do you imagine your personal contribution in the Tunisian political life?
20. What role can women play in civil society and associations?
 - a. How? Why?
 - b. How do you imagine your personal contribution in Tunisian civil society?
 - c. How would you personally contribute to civil society on a concrete/tangible level?
21. Do you personally know active women in civil society in your entourage/close circle?
 - a. If yes, what do you think of them? What is your impression of them?
22. Are you familiar with the active associations in your region?
 - a. If yes, can you please name them?
23. Do you think women have the same chances as men to contribute to the associative and civil society life in Tunisia? And why?
24. Do you think women have the same chances as men to contribute to the political life in Tunisia? And why?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Go in depth: Do you think women and men have the same chances to vote in elections?
 - i. If yes, why?
 - ii. If not, why?
 - c. Do you personally know women in your entourage/close circle who are active in politics?
 - i. If yes, what do you think of them? What is your impression of them?
25. Are there any women politicians that you like/trust? Are there any women politicians that you don't trust?
26. If you're faced with a man and woman candidates with the same qualifications and capacities, for whom would you vote? The man, the woman, or does the gender not matter to you?
 - a. Why?

PART IV: CONCLUSION

27. If you had the chance to establish your own association, what would be its scope of activities?
 - a. How would you contribute to Tunisia or to your region?
28. If you had the chance to establish your own political party, how would you organize it?
 - a. Go in depth with the responses, looking for tangible answers:
 - i. At the leadership level
 - ii. Party members
 - iii. Party activities
 - iv. Orientation and goals
29. (For nonvoters) If this party you imagined were to actually exist, would you vote for it in the upcoming election?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. If not, why?
30. What did you learn today from our discussion?
 - a. How did this discussion impact you personally? Did it cause you to change your mind about any personal positions or ideas?
 - i. If yes, why did this change happen?
31. If you were in our shoes and wanted to convince other women to vote, what would you do?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND PARTICIPATION