

Remarks of Ikram Ben Said
on behalf of Aswat Nissa
Washington, DC, May 19, 2014

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of Aswat Nissa, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to NDI for this prestigious award.

In 2011, my country, Tunisia, experienced the first revolution of the Arab Spring. The past three years have been hectic, challenging and exciting, all at the same time. It has not been easy. Since street protests began in December 2010 through this very moment, my fellow Tunisians and I have been in a hurry.

In a hurry to build a new democracy;

In a hurry to preserve this newly acquired freedom;

In a hurry to realize a longstanding dream: A Tunisia where women and men are equal, people live with dignity, and youth can realize their full potential.

We are indeed enthusiastic. But we are also well aware of the difficulties ahead of us.

Post-revolutionary Tunisia has faced numerous internal conflicts, sub-regional disparities, unmet expectations, youth frustration and unemployment, economic regression, political instability, terrorist threats and lack of a clear transitional justice plan. Our reality for the past three years has been reflected in severe polarization—within politics and society, between Islamists and secular groups—that impacts all issues.

But despite this turmoil, the Tunisian people have made great progress:

1. We have a very vigilant and dynamic civil society;
2. Compared to before the revolution, there is today real freedom of the press in our country;

3. There has been a broad consensus on a new, modern constitution, which specifically mentions the importance of parity between women and men;
4. And of course, Tunisia recently withdrew all reservations on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a great step toward equality between women and men.

Tunisia could not have achieved these successes, which are unique in the Middle East and North Africa, without Tunisian women.

But despite all of our contributions and commitment, Tunisian women still face unacceptable discrimination. Close to half of Tunisian women are victims of violence, which too often is trivialized by society and goes unprosecuted, leading women themselves not to report such abuse.

Moreover, Tunisian women remain severely underrepresented in political parties, in the National Constituent Assembly—where only 49 women were elected out of a total 217 seats—and in the government. There is only one woman minister and two women deputy ministers.

Aswat Nissa believes that Tunisia can do much better!

Since its creation in 2011, Aswat Nissa has worked to empower Tunisian women from all walks of life to raise their voices and take their rightful place in politics so they can build a society where women are treated as equal to men, and where women are aware of their rights and fight for them.

We believe that women who are empowered can achieve political, social and economic change that will lead to equality.

As Tunisia approaches national and local elections that will serve as key milestones, Aswat Nissa is thrilled to announce the launch of its first Women's Political Academy, made possible by the generous support of the Madeleine K. Albright Grant. The Academy will have two objectives.

The first is to Increase women's representation in local councils by helping women candidates run for office and win.

- The second is to support elected women to help them carry out local policies that address issues that impact the daily lives of women across Tunisia.

Aswat Nissa is looking forward to turning this initiative into a sustainable academy that for years to come will offer a unique, safe space for learning, sharing, questioning, networking, and dialogue for women politicians from across the political spectrum.

To us, this is more than an award. This is recognition not only of the Aswat Nissa team, but of all Tunisian women and men who are committed to make history by making Tunisia's transition a success.

Tunisia will succeed!

Tunisia will succeed if all women, Islamist and secular alike, work together and advocate together for real equality between men and women;

Tunisia will succeed if men don't consider laws which enshrine gender parity as a threat, and see women politicians as partners, not competitors;

Tunisia will succeed if we, Tunisians, consider our diversity a strength and not a source of polarization;

Tunisia will succeed if more women are involved in decision-making at all levels;

Tunisia will succeed if Tunisian women and men alike stand up for free and fair elections later this year and next;

Tunisians believe, as Nelson Mandela said, that "from the disaster of the past, a new society [will] be born which the world [will] be proud of";

Finally, I would like to sincerely thank the NDI team, especially my friends whom I met five years ago. For us, this relationship is more than a partnership. It's a journey. It's a path toward democracy, dignity, human rights, and a better world.

Thank you

Ikram Ben Said

