

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN TUNISIA AFTER THE REVOLUTION

FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS IN TUNISIA
Conducted February 17-28, 2012

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NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. With staff members and volunteer political practitioners from more than 100 nations, NDI brings together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and expertise. Partners receive broad exposure to best practices in international democratic development that can be adapted to the needs of their own countries. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies. The Institute's work upholds the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also promotes the development of institutionalized channels of communications among citizens, political institutions and elected officials, and strengthens their ability to improve the quality of life for all citizens.

NDI believes that equitable participation of women in politics and government is essential to building and sustaining democracy. Comprising more than 50 percent of the world's population, women continue to be under-represented as voters, political leaders and elected officials. Democracy cannot truly deliver for all of its citizens if half of the population remains underrepresented in the political arena. NDI helps women acquire the tools necessary to participate successfully in all aspects of the political process. Our programs engage women in legislatures, political parties and civil society as leaders, activists and informed citizens. These programs create an environment where women can advocate on matters of policy, run for political office, be elected, govern effectively and participate meaningfully in every facet of civic and political life. For more information about NDI, please visit www.ndi.org.

PREFACE

Women from all walks of life, age groups and regions of Tunisia took to the streets in the December 2010 – January 2011 uprising that led to the ousting of former dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. Women also participated in large numbers in the October 2011 National Constituent Assembly (NCA) elections as candidates and campaigners, encouraged by the country's new electoral law requiring gender parity on political party candidate lists. Since the revolution, women have also played active roles in civil society and in political parties in the hope of contributing to the emerging political transition. Yet Tunisian women increasingly voice concerns that conventional gender relations and stereotypes are reemerging despite the solidarity among women and men during the revolution. The gender parity for the NCA elections, for example, did not guarantee equal representation of elected women because most political parties did not nominate women as heads of candidate lists. As a result, 24 percent of NCA seats are held by women members. During previous focus group research conducted by NDI, Tunisian women spoke about their struggles to participate in political life. Women expressed the belief that politicians make decisions on their behalf without consultation, as well as concerns over the commitment of NCA members to preserve women's rights.¹ To further NDI's assistance to Tunisian partners in civil society and parties, support women's political participation, and contribute to providing public input into the transition process, NDI piloted a national, qualitative study on Tunisians' perceptions toward women in public life from February 17 to 28, 2012. The study was carried out concurrent with the opening of discussions within the NCA on the country's new constitution.

Objectives of the research: NDI has conducted regular qualitative research throughout Tunisia since March 2011 to inform political and civic leaders about citizens' priorities and attitudes toward the political transition. The objectives of NDI's qualitative research on women's political participation were to compare and contrast attitudes and opinions of women and men in different regions in Tunisia, and to provide timely and objective information to Tunisian partners on the following issues:

- Perceptions of women and their roles in Tunisian society;
- Common social, political and economic priorities for women; and,
- Avenues for women's political participation.

The findings of this study are being used to inform Tunisian decision-makers – in political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the NCA and government ministries – about citizens' attitudes and opinions on these issues. This research represents a complementary study to four others previously conducted as part of an ongoing series of public opinion research into Tunisian citizen attitudes toward the evolving political transition.²

¹ *From Revolution to Reform: Citizen Expectations on the One-Year Anniversary of the Tunisian Uprising* (published January 2012)

² *From Revolution to Reform: Citizen Expectations on the One-Year Anniversary of the Tunisian Uprising* (published January 2012), *Voices of a Revolution: Conversations with Tunisia's Youth* (published April 2011), *Imagining the Road Ahead: Citizen Attitudes about Tunisia and the Constituent Assembly Election Period* (published July 2011), *Framing the Future: Citizen Attitudes about Electoral and Constitution Drafting Processes* (published September 2011).

Information about focus groups: Focus groups are open-ended group interviews directed by a moderator, and which follow a pre-set guideline. The purpose of focus group research is to understand the attitudes, opinions and experiences of participants who are randomly recruited for the exercise and whose opinions may reflect those of the population at large. Focus groups are particularly useful in gaining a deeper appreciation of the motivations, feelings and values behind participants' reactions. The group format additionally enables respondents to participate in an exchange of ideas – thus revealing a more in-depth understanding of why opinions are held – that may not emerge in individual in-depth interviews or quantitative surveys. Focus group discussions are comprised of a small number of participants, typically eight to 12 per group. However, depending on the situation, groups may be slightly smaller or larger. For example, some groups may benefit from being larger because it is likely that in the area where the group is conducted one or more of the participants will refuse to speak at length, even if pressed. Focus groups allow decision-makers to understand the motivations, feelings and values behind participant opinions through facilitated, open-ended discussion. The research team is confident that in general the discussion was genuinely frank and that participants spoke freely about the topics. Much of the information within this report was recorded from opinions expressed spontaneously without moderator prompting. Focus group findings are only a snapshot of opinions at the moment the research is undertaken. Given the dynamism of the Tunisian transition, public opinion is in constant flux as citizens respond to unfolding events. The conclusions of this report therefore only represent opinions when research was conducted in mid-February, 2012.

Methodology: NDI held 15 focus groups with a total of 151 participants in five cities across Tunisia from February 17 to 28, 2012. Target cities were selected based on their population size, economic situation, geographic location and role in political events during 2011. NDI divided each location into three distinct demographic groups to capture the perspectives of a broad cross-section of Tunisian society: 1) women (ages 18 to 25); 2) women (ages 30 to 50); and 3) men (ages 18-50). Each group comprised between nine and 11 participants with equal distribution of age range, professions and neighborhoods. The gender breakdown was 99 women (66 percent), 52 men (34 percent). Sixty-three participants were employed, while 63 were unemployed. Twenty-five women participants categorized themselves as 'housewives.' Participants were selected and re-screened to ensure diverse representation of neighborhoods, socioeconomic backgrounds and professions. To ensure reliable results from discussions, however, all participants had at least a baccalaureate (high school) degree.

Group Locations: The 15 focus groups took place in five urban locations throughout Tunisia (listed in order of implementation): Greater Tunis, Sfax, Medenine, Gafsa and Sidi Bouzid (see the map in this section). Greater Tunis was selected because it encompasses the capital and largest city Tunis and its surrounding areas, and is the national center for public administration, commerce and tourism. Sfax was selected because it is Tunisia's second largest city with the most industrial activity and largest port. Medenine, one of Tunisia's southern governorates, shares a border with Libya and was affected by the presence of 800,000 Libyan refugees since that country's conflict began; . Additionally, Medenine's voter registration rate was one of the lowest in the

country and the region had the second-lowest number of candidate lists suggesting relatively high levels of voter apathy or confusion. Gafsa, despite its rich natural phosphate resources, has remained a hotbed of labor unrest. NDI selected Sidi Bouzid as the symbolic birthplace of the Tunisian revolution – and the Arab Spring – and because of its long history of neglect and isolation. High unemployment has also particularly affected women and youth from that region. Though NDI had also selected the city of Jendouba to conduct research in the country's Northwest region, political unrest and heavy rains and flooding during the time of the research prevented the NDI team from accessing the region. In all cities, NDI identified appropriate venues for focus group discussions to ensure participant privacy and sufficient space for indirect observation by the NDI team.

Staffing and Logistics: The Institute commissioned ELKA Consulting to organize the study in five cities across the country. ELKA is a marketing and public opinion research firm based in Tunisia. The focus group moderator was a Tunisian citizen trained in focus group moderation techniques by NDI and ELKA. All groups were conducted in Tunisian Arabic dialect, and transcripts were prepared in Arabic and English. An NDI team observed all focus groups remotely.

Outside influence: Every effort was made to ensure there was no undue influence exerted on the participants in the groups in all cases. The focus group guideline was not shared with local authorities prior to the sessions. There was no case in which the findings from one or more groups differed radically from overall findings in this study, which suggests that any local influence that may have occurred did not impact the research.

MAP OF TUNISIA (FOCUS GROUP LOCATIONS STARRED)



One World Nations Online. May 2012.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the Tunisian democratic transition began, women have increasingly voiced concerns over the reemergence of conventional gender relations and stereotypes despite the solidarity among women and men during the 2011 uprising. In mid-February 2012, nearly four months after the NCA elections and as Assembly members began to draft a new constitution and International Women's Day approached, NDI conducted a qualitative research study on perceptions of Tunisian women and men toward women in society and public life. NDI organized 15 focus groups with 151 participants throughout Tunisia. Questions posed to participants covered opinions on: national direction; perceptions of gender roles; social, political and economic priorities; and political participation. The research was conducted to further NDI's assistance to Tunisian partners in civil society and parties, support women's political participation, and contribute to providing public input into the transition process. This research does not attempt to generalize perceptions about gender across Tunisia. The observations and findings are drawn directly from participants' comments, and are summarized below.

I. National Direction

The majority of participants felt that Tunisia is headed in the wrong direction, referencing the declining economic situation, corruption, regionalism, and growing security concerns. Additionally, many participants asserted that the transition process has stalled. Participants acknowledged, however, that increased freedom of expression is a major positive change in Tunisia.

Participants noted that current attitudes and opinions are hindering progress and expressed hope that “mentalities” will change. Some participants equated an improved mentality with increased patience for the democratic transition and economic development, in addition to increased respect for others' ideas regardless of religious or political affiliation. In general, participants used the word “equality” in terms of social class and regional representation, but not in the sense of equality between genders.

II. Perceptions of Women and Women's Roles in Tunisian Society

Traditional gender stereotypes were pervasive regardless of conversation topic. Gender norms are deeply embedded in participants' environments, illustrated by respondents' comfort placing women and men in traditional gender roles in both private spheres (family, household) and public (political institutions, workplace). Participants expressed a widespread and traditional mentality that women should play a mostly private role in Tunisian society. According to this view, while it is not necessarily unacceptable for women to play public roles, fulfilling private responsibilities leaves little time for public roles that are more commonly reserved for men. In describing their households, participants acknowledged divisions of labor with women tending mainly to child-rearing, cooking and cleaning, while men provide financial support and make

decisions at the family level. This division of roles was not always regarded as negative; many women expressed pride in fulfilling traditional duties. The overwhelming majority of men respondents, regardless of age or region, said they are more comfortable having a man for a boss because they could not accept taking orders from a woman. At least one person in every focus group asserted that men and women have different mental and physical capacities.

Despite initially expressing support for equality among Tunisian citizens, participants struggled to reconcile support for gender equality with religious doctrine and with the country's patriarchal social and political structures that simultaneously give women a privileged and discriminatory status. In describing a brighter future for Tunisia, women and men respondents envisioned "equality" among social classes and regions, but never spontaneously evoked equality in gender terms. When asked specifically if they would support gender equality, men and women focus group participants responded at first with "yes," then quickly revoked their answers. There was near consensus on enshrining women's rights in the new constitution; however participants rebuffed the idea of an article in the new constitution guaranteeing equality, citing religious arguments to demonstrate that this would never be possible, or acceptable. Inheritance – in which Tunisian men and women do not have equal rights according to religious law – was often cited as evidence that women and men cannot be equal. Both men and women used this argument. Further, many women and men added that if Tunisian citizens had total gender equality, then women would be required to serve in the army and accept hard labor jobs, which would be unacceptable.

Through their comments, participants acknowledged former first lady Leila Ben Ali's influence on the status of Tunisian women. Though rarely stated outright, the tenor of remarks within focus groups was that the rights Tunisian women enjoy today can be attributed to policies of the former regime. Men respondents, particularly in regions with highest unemployment, referred with varying levels of contempt to the privileged status Leila Ben Ali gave women. While women did not share such negative opinions, they recognized that women's rights could be called into question precisely because of their association with the past. Young women shared that they no longer feel safe when alone in public spaces or out after dark, because they know they have lost the special status granted by and preserved by previous regimes.

III. Common Social, Political and Economic Priorities for Women

All focus group participants, across regions, ages and genders, consistently cited unemployment and the rising cost of living as top priorities. Men were more likely than women to say that their economic situation had changed significantly for the worse since the January 2011 revolution, though women consistently mentioned unemployment and the cost of living as impediments to getting the country on the right track. Discussions about employment inevitably led to discussions about employment opportunities for men and women, and wage parity. Participants generally perceived that women and men have equal opportunity for jobs, but recognized that there are widespread and deep inequities in pay because women are more likely to accept lower salaries than men, which participants felt was necessary but unfair. Men from

regions with the highest levels of unemployment expressed resentment toward women employed in the public sector and factories since it was their perception that it is easier for women to obtain such employment than men precisely because women accept lower pay. Women more than men explained – often with pride – that women accept any job for any salary in order to support their families.

All participants cited security as a top priority, but men and women defined the issue in different ways. Women expressed more anxiety than men about their physical security, citing personal experiences of rampant street harassment and implying that cases of sexual harassment are also becoming more frequent in the workplace. Men on the other hand defined security in terms of police and military forces, expressing relief that these groups no longer constantly harass them in their daily lives. In the context of these discussions, respondents often mention that before the revolution security forces more effectively protected women from harassment. This suggests that it is possible that women might have experienced more sexual harassment in the past had citizens generally not been under such tight control and surveillance. Now that the regime and its political police have been dissolved, sexual harassment may continue to impact women's sense of security.

Participants consistently talked about the need for a change in “mentality” in order to part with the past and move the country forward. More than men, women tended to define a better mentality as having greater respect for one another's ideas, regardless of religious or political differences. They also expressed a sense of sorrow over the hostile tone of televised debates among political parties and candidates. Women also defined an improved “mentality” in terms of having more patience with the new government, and not expecting that changes will occur overnight. Men also called for more patience, but described a persisting mentality of corruption, victimhood and apathy that is detrimental to the country's progress. To support this view, some men spoke of passengers not paying fares for public transportation because they do not feel a sense of public responsibility.

IV. Avenues for Women's Political Participation

Voting was widely perceived as a clear avenue for political participation, but less so among young women. Citizens felt an overwhelming sense of civic responsibility during the NCA elections and described the great pride they felt when voting. In limited instances, administrative or geographic challenges made it impossible to vote – for example, some participants shared that they tried to vote but didn't find their name on the voter registry, and in other cases, they were based in one region for school or work and could not return to their home city to vote – but generally, women and men were enthusiastic about participating in politics in this way. While the majority of participants reported having voted, only in groups of young women aged 18 to 25 did half or more participants abstain from voting. These women expressed confusion over the large number of political party choices, as well as administrative registration and voting procedures. In one instance, a young woman from Sidi Bouzid suggested that her family forbade her to vote. Another participant from Gafsa admitted that she abstained from

voting even though her husband was a candidate on an independent list, because she felt her vote would have no impact on the election outcome.

Political parties were not perceived as particularly welcoming to women or citizens in general. After witnessing parties' activities during the electoral campaign, many respondents recounted that they have not seen or heard from parties since, except by television. Participants widely agreed that parties sought out women during the campaign to fulfill their gender quotas, but that with few exceptions, current women members of parties appear to hold little real responsibility. When discussing the election of women NCA members, participants attributed their success to the fact that they ran on a successful party list, rather than to their individual qualities as candidates. These comments were made in disparaging fashion, suggesting that both women candidates and parties were profiting in their own ways from the women's quota.

In comparison to parties, respondents view civil society as a positive avenue for women's participation, but were unable to identify names and activities of CSOs. This limited knowledge of Tunisian CSOs is a contributing factor to low public participation in civil society. Some participants also cited a lack of initiative on the part of CSOs; suggesting that if they were more accessible, had more resources, or recruited more actively, these groups would have larger memberships. Even if they were unable to name Tunisian CSOs, many women expressed a strong sense of support and relief in knowing that women's organizations exist in Tunisia to help other women. Women from Gafsa, Medenine and Sidi Bouzid in particular expressed a strong desire to participate in women's organizations, and say they would do so if they knew better how to access them.

V. Regional Perspectives

While broad trends emerged across all cities where focus groups were held, the research yielded regional variances on a number of subjects, mostly linked to economic priorities and each city's sense of identity and distinction. Participants from Tunis see their personal situation as better in comparison to other regions in the country due to the prevalence of job opportunities, better infrastructure, and access to administrative services and public transportation. Sfax residents also viewed their region's economic and security situations as more favorable than the rest of the country due to the number of factory-related job opportunities. In contrast, women and men from Medenine, Gafsa and Sidi Bouzid perceived their regions' situation as far worse off than the rest of the country, mainly due to economic hardship. Women from these regions consistently expressed a desire for more entertainment such as youth clubs, cultural centers or concerts, and they described a general and pervasive sense of boredom and lack of purpose. To a much greater extent than their counterparts in Tunis and Sfax, these women also discussed the prospects of involvement in civic activities with enthusiasm.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

I. National Direction

More than half of the participants expressed that they felt Tunisia is headed in the wrong direction, with some adding that the country's transition process is stalled. Participants in all cities pointed to the negative effects of inflation and the rising cost of living as major indicators that the country is going in the wrong direction. Perceptions of a deteriorating security situation, corruption and continued regionalism were cited as further examples to support this view. In some cases, participants expressed disappointment with what they view as religious rhetoric eclipsing national priorities. There was no gender or age variant linked to this perception.

"We are on the way to the abyss; Tunisia is like someone who is sick and who is being given painkillers instead of being fully diagnosed to find out the causes of the disease." (Female, Gafsa, 30 years old, teacher)

"The situation is really hard with the rising cost of living, Libya used to be our only resource." (Female, Medenine, 25 years old, housewife)

"Nowadays, the ingredients for ojja [Tunisian staple dish] cost as much as fish; this is inconceivable." (Male, Tunis, 31 years old, technician)

"There's some fear after the revolution, I never used to worry about my personal security now all I think about when I'm outside is to go back home safely." (Female, Sfax, 23 years old, student)

"We keep hearing the same speech 'Tunisia is in good/honest hands.' Who said so? I haven't seen directors or managers newly appointed in official positions; the same people are still there. I keep hearing the same discourse in cafés. They say that things will get better now that mosques are full. These people have spent a long time in prison and don't have any expertise in administration; there are no technocrats in the government. My wife and my daughter are veiled but can this be an indication that the country is going in the right direction?" (Male, Sfax, 36 years old, public sector employee)

"Nothing has changed in Tunisia; it is hard to apply the concept of democracy. In the West, minorities are respected; it is not the case here. The opinions of the

minorities are not respected. The revolution was led by youth and it's not conceivable that it could be stolen by the elderly. Youth should be given the lead. I've seen nothing in those TV debates with political parties. Can you think of anything positive that Ennahda did for the unemployed? Nothing." (Male, Medenine, 30 years old, employee)

However, even skeptical participants acknowledged that freedom of expression, an improved police force, diminished corruption and the military's independence are signs Tunisia is going in the right direction. For many, the mere fact that participants could freely express themselves during the focus groups without fear of harassment or government spying was reason enough to believe that the country is on the right track. These respondents urged patience toward the elected government to give its members time to prove themselves. Regardless of age, gender or city, several also expressed relief that Tunisia's revolution did not result in the level of violence experienced in neighboring countries also undergoing transitions.

"Freedom of expression is our only gain; at least we can now talk about [President Moncef] Marzouki the same way we can talk about a waiter in a café." (Female, Sfax, 37 years old, secretary)

"We are going in the right direction; the citizens are aware and the government is made up of intellectuals who fear God and who have been oppressed. The government needs to focus on internal issues; they can comment on the situation in Syria but without too much involvement and they shouldn't rely on financial aid from abroad." (Male, Sidi Bouzid, 36 years old, unemployed)

"The elite says that Tunisians need to know the meaning of democracy. We learn civic education at school but we don't know how to implement it. We are smart; we just need to achieve our goals through democracy and Tunisia will then become a state where law is applied and rights are granted." (Female, Tunis, 30 years old, housewife)

"We need to be patient with the government and give them a chance; transitional justice needs time." (Male, Gafsa, 30 years old, worker)

"I believe that we succeeded. It is an honor for us to be the birthplace of the first revolution in the Arab countries. There was more bloodshed in Egypt, Libya and Syria." (Female, Sfax, 31 years old, housewife)

"The majority of Tunisians think that the situation is chaotic. I don't think so. I believe that it is quite normal after having

had a system that didn't encourage pluralism. Now the system is dynamic; we have opposition and we have laws."
(Male, Medenine, 25 years old, employee)

Each focus group began with a series of questions to assess participants' major concerns, as well as their general perceptions of Tunisia's future direction. The moderator would ask participants to imagine waking up the following day to find that the country is "perfect," and then to describe what that would look like. In concrete terms, citizens dreamed of a future Tunisia with no traffic, clean streets, parks, more effective public transport, improved security and – especially in the interior – better infrastructure and more social and cultural facilities.

"I would wake up and find the roads in a very good condition. I would find an adequate space where I could go jogging. My boss would talk to me in a respectful way. I would get the salary I deserve according to my qualifications and my performance and not the salary that my boss is willing to afford. I would go back home safely in the evening and wouldn't find guys drinking in the neighborhood." (Male, Sfax, 21 years old, student)

Participants perceived current "mentalities" as an impediment to progress and expressed hope that attitudes and opinions would change. They defined "mentality" in various ways. For some, a better mentality would mean that Tunisians respect one another's ideas regardless of religious or political differences. For others, it would mean having more patience for the democratic transition and economic development. Some equated an improved mentality with "patience," adding that citizens should not expect the government to provide everything for its citizens immediately; women made this reference more often than men. Both genders linked a persistent negative "mentality" to the former regime's corruption. While the word "equality" was spontaneously evoked many times, it was mentioned in the sense of social classes and regions, never in terms of gender equality.

"We need to get rid of the mentality of selfishness and discrimination between social classes, towns and rural areas. There should be equity between the different regions and the capital city. The Northwest and the South are marginalized. Here in Medenine the kids don't know what a theme park is like." (Female, Medenine, 37 years old, housewife)

"The mentality of regionalism must be totally changed. When I go to Tunis no one calls me by my name or asks me to have coffee together. I'm just called 'you from Gafsa' and I'm talking about people I know." (Male, Gafsa, 25 years old, student)

“People have been living in poverty for 23 years, then the revolution took place and there were martyrs. No government can change the situation in one month.” (Female, Tunis, 45 years old, teacher)

“I want to wake up and find an exact understanding of the revolutionary goals which are: employment, equality, justice and development. Not: Salafism, secularism, niqab and terrorism.” (Male, Sidi Bouzid, 23 years old, student)

“The economic and social objectives of the revolution need to be realized; employment opportunities need to be created for the unemployed especially the unskilled ones, fair regional development and improving the living conditions of the disadvantaged.” (Female, Gafsa, 32 years old, housewife)

Participants, particularly young women, had difficulty believing that an idealized future was possible given mounting concerns over corruption and the disappointing pace of reform. Even the most imaginative respondents' comments reflected an air of improbability and disappointment.

“Tunisia will be perfect first, when we get rid of the symbols of corruption; second, when we overcome the unemployment phenomenon; third, getting out of poverty since many areas are suffering from a dire situation; fourth, I'm dreaming of regaining our security and safety since nowadays Tunisia is unfortunately enduring a chaotic situation.” (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 24 years old, student)

II. Perceptions of Women in Tunisian Society

Most women participants did not perceive themselves as playing equal roles in society, despite the prominent roles played by women in the revolution. Conversely, male participants evinced a belief that men and women's roles in society are equal. Some also expressed concern about how a new religious discourse is affecting perceptions of women's roles. Women who have felt disrespected by men in the private sphere – usually discussed in the context of sharing household responsibilities – were often criticized by other women participants for not doing an adequate job at managing household affairs.

“Men and women have more or less the same challenges, except when it comes to equality.” (Female, Medenine, 22 years old, student)

“There is no equality in Tunisia; both men and women work and when they are home the man just watches TV while the

woman does the house chores. It is the way we have been brought up and this needs to change." (Female, Sfax, 33 years old, housewife)

"If a woman wears a mini skirt in Medenine, her legs might be cut." (Female, Medenine, 25 years old, student)

"There should be separation between religion and politics; women have always been present in most jobs and now they say that women must stay at home." (Female, Tunis, 30 years old, housewife)

"There are women who chose to retreat and not participate in public life because they have been belittled." (Female, Gafsa, 21 years old, student)

While participants spoke in favor of political and social equality among all citizens, the question of gender equality evoked mixed responses as participants struggled to express an acceptable role for women within religious doctrine and Tunisia's patriarchal social and political norms. These norms were viewed positively for endowing women with special status; conversely, the former regime, and former first lady Leila Ben Ali in particular, were criticized for having supposedly given women certain privileges over men. When asked specifically if they would support gender equality, focus group participants responded at first with "yes".

"Yes! Of course...what's the matter with all of you? We need full equality, even in inheritance." (Male, Sfax, 36 years old, public sector employee)

"Women need to participate in everything and men need to accept that as a fact." (Female, Medenine, 30 years old, housewife)

"If I advocate my rights as a woman this means that I've underestimated myself and my gender. Laws in the constitution should be drafted according to citizenship and not gender. The constitution needs to guarantee the rights of all Tunisians, men and women alike." (Female, Gafsa, 30 years old, teacher)

"If women's rights are not fully constitutionalized there will be another revolution led by women." (Female, Medenine, 24 years old, employee)

"Women or men, we are both human beings and the difference between us does not preclude our demand of the same rights." (Male, Sidi Bouzid, 43 years old, unemployed)

After making these initial comments, and when asked whether they would support total gender equality, participants quickly revoked their answers and struggled to balance religious conviction with support for equality. In fact, participants almost unanimously said they would support enshrining women's rights in the new constitution, but invoked religious arguments to oppose a specific article guaranteeing equality. Inheritance, as regulated by the Qur'an, was used most often as evidence and justification of how men and women cannot be equal. Further, many women and men added that if Tunisian citizens had total gender equality, then women would be required to serve in the army and work at hard labor, which would be unacceptable.

"It is not right to talk about gender equality since both sexes cannot be equal starting from the physiological difference up to the personality difference....I will base myself on the Quran and Islam since we are an Islamic country and it is not right to separate between the religion and our country."
(Male, Sidi Bouzid, 43 years old, unemployed)

"[I would support] equality in everything except for the things mentioned in the religion; they cannot be changed."
(Male, Sfax, 33 years old, lawyer)

"The Islamic Sharia treats all human beings equally; we don't need any laws." (Female, Sfax, 30 years old, housewife)

"We need full equality; there are those who call for equality in inheritance but I think religion needs to be respected."
(Female, Medenine, 25 years old, housewife)

"If equality in inheritance is allowed, men will be dispossessed/deprived of their manliness." (Female, Tunis, 36 years old, administrative assistant)

There were perceptions of inequality among genders, but many women – particularly younger women – had difficulty translating their sense of injustice into a specific grievance. In Tunis, young women participants blamed women who think they are inferior to men for this inequality.

"There are women who criticize other women as if they were men. We need awareness-raising because there are women who believe they are inferior to men." (Female, Tunis, 23 years old, MA student)

"The problem is that women are forgotten and excluded. Women need to enjoy their rights just like men." (Female, Gafsa, 21 years old, student)

“Women’s concerns are much deeper than men’s. Right now it’s as if we were going 2,000 years backward. We realized after the revolution that women’s status is truly weak. Men used to be afraid under the previous regime now they want to go back to the Dark Ages. Women’s rights would just be acknowledged on paper.” (Female, Tunis, 25 years old, teacher)

“We need specific rights for women because when we talk about rights for citizens, Tunisian men will consider them man’s rights only.” (Female, Tunis, 22 years old, pre-school assistant)

“Women have no role to play after the revolution.” (Female, Gafsa, 20 years old, student)

“Under the previous regime, [men] were obliged to accept women; things have changed after the revolution, it’s as if it was a men’s revolution.” (Female, Gafsa, 25 years old, housewife)

Traditional gender stereotypes and inequities were pervasive in all discussions, but not necessarily framed with negative connotation. In fact, even the women who lamented not having an equal role to play in society generally accepted the premise that women and men have fundamental differences in roles, because they believe women do not share the same capacities.

“[Women and men] are not born equal in our bodies, capacities and responsibilities.” (Female, Tunis, 50 years old, insurance sector employee)

“Each [gender] has a specific role; I believe that a happy home is managed by man.” (Male, Tunis, 34 years old, finance inspector)

“Men are generally responsible for spending; however, women are responsible for the family warmth.” (Male, Sidi Bouzid, 43 years old, unemployed)

Participants often provided contradictory statements, denouncing inequality on the one hand and frowning upon instances of women and men acting outside of traditional gender roles on the other.

“Women’s responsibilities are heavier, since nowadays men tend to spend their day at work or the coffee shop, while the entire house’s responsibilities fall on the women’s head. Moreover, we have a new pervasive phenomenon in Sidi Bouzid, which is women working as construction workers,

which is really sorrowful.” (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 50 years old, public sector employee)

“Just imagine an unemployed man staying home when his pregnant wife works outside.” (Female, Tunis, 45 years old, teacher)

“When men physically assault women they are automatically jailed, women too should be jailed if they assault men.” (Female, Tunis, 36 years old, administrative assistant)

“After the NCA elections, three men have been appointed for the presidency. The fact that no women got at least one of these positions shows the way the Tunisian society functions. Women do not necessarily take the initiative and they lack the courage.” (Male, Tunis, 24 years old, student)

“There is no equality in politics because women don't have the right to run for presidency.” (Female, Sfax, 33 years old, housewife)

For participants, marriage is the ultimate framework for women's participation in society and the economy. Participants framed their answers around marriage when asked about employment opportunities for women, entrepreneurial prospects, financial independence and social mobility. When asked to imagine entrepreneurial opportunities for women in their regions, participants were often unable to do so. In all cities, it was nearly impossible for participants to define women's financial independence; they often asked the moderator to clarify “independence.” Young women participants had more difficulty defining financial independence, whereas older women with work and family experience had difficulty imagining financial independence because they already provide for their families.

“Why do we always suppose that a woman needs to be in the man's shadow? She can also invest and save and have a house of her own.” (Female, Gafsa, 21 years old, student)

“I don't believe women can ever be financially independent because they invest their salaries for their families.” (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 25 years old, housewife)

“Women's chances to have a business of their own are very limited in the south because men do not want to have a woman as a boss.” (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 20 years old, student)

"In Tunisia, women who want to set up their own businesses lack encouragement." (Female, Tunis, 23 years old, MA student)

"[Women] don't have the same chances to be economically independent, since women tend to self-sacrifice for the best of their families and also for the best of their children, however men do not." (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 50 years old, public sector employee)

"Women are financially independent before marriage, but once married a woman becomes an investment project for the husband; he would give her just her pocket money and take the rest." (Female, Gafsa, 32 years old, housewife)

"Married women are financially dependent." (Female, Medenine, 36 years old, inspector)

"Women are restricted in terms of mobility when looking for a job; they can't move." (Female, Medenine, 25 years old, housewife)

Men participants consistently inferred two opposite but commonly held perceptions:

either that women cannot be financially independent because they are supposed to move directly from their parents' homes where they are provided for into a marriage where their husbands provide for them; or that women are always financially independent because they are not obliged to contribute their salaries to the families and therefore do not experience the same financial pressure as men.

"Women are being tied up in their environment and in the marriage institution; when she gets her salary her husband abuses her and if she doesn't yield to him then they end up divorcing." (Male, Gafsa, 39 years old, engineer)

"My wife used to work but I stopped her so that she can take care of me and the house." (Male, Sfax, 43 years old, technician)

"Women invest their salaries in makeup and clothes." (Male, Tunis, 48 years old, unemployed)

The Personal Status Code (PSC) is still perceived as the basis for Tunisian women's rights and status.³ Women from the 30-50 age groups across all cities were better able to define the PSC than any other group. They defined it as a legal code that "organizes

³ The Personal Status Code (PSC) (Arabic: مجلة الأحوال الشخصية) consists of a series of laws enacted on August 13, 1956 by Bey Decree and entered into effect on January 1, 1957. Popularly perceived as aiming for the achievement of equality between men and women in many areas, the PSC is one of the most progressive laws in the MENA region.

everything in the home," outlaws polygamy, and gives women more rights in divorce. But overall, there were very mixed awareness levels of the PSC among the young women's and men's groups.

"Women used to be protected under Ben Ali. I think they are afraid of losing the PSC." (Male, Tunis, 24 years old, student)

"The PSC is the only true asset for Tunisian women and now it is being targeted by other countries which want to limit Tunisian women's rights." (Female, Gafsa, 31 years old, housewife)

"It is vital to preserve the PSC because someone can be a pious person with a very long beard and yet beat his wife. I am for respecting Tunisian women. They have a significant role, they are very competent and we need to preserve their rights and freedoms." (Male, Sfax, 36 years old, public sector employee)

"Nowadays, Tunisia doesn't need the PSC since women know their rights and men know their duties." (Male, Sidi Bouzid, 47 years old, technician)

"Women need more awareness so that they can preserve and defend their rights." (Female, Sfax, 31 years old, public sector employee)

Mixed attitudes and opinions toward the PSC often led to spontaneous discussions about issues that touch both society and religion, including inheritance⁴ laws and practices and polygamy⁵. When discussing heritage, most participants, across gender and different age groups, favored a literal interpretation of the *sharia*. With limited exceptions from one men's group and another women's group who were absolutely in favor of inheritance equality, almost no one was willing to discuss the issue.

"No equality in inheritance. This is a religious issue; we can have equality in other matters but not in questions that are related to religion." (Female, Gafsa, 21 years old, student)

"I am against equality in inheritance; religious matters should not be changed." (Female, Tunis, 21 years old, student)

A vocal minority expressed relative support for equality in inheritance, with conditions.

⁴ "For the son, a portion equal to that of two females." Verse 11- Surah 4: Women (*An-Nisa*), unofficial translation from Arabic into English.

⁵ According to Article 18 of the PSC, polygamy is prohibited in Tunisia.

"We need to realize that having equality in inheritance is in the best interests of women. But if we can't have that, let's try to keep the PSC as it is. We can give up equality in inheritance but we don't need polygamy either." (Female, Tunis, 22 years old, preschool assistant)

Conversely, participants used social rather than religious arguments to justify reinstating polygamy. This argument was not exclusive to one gender, age group or region; a critical mass of participants in each focus group weighed the benefits of legalizing polygamy. Some tended to suggest that polygamy was a good way to ensure that women do not end up unmarried. Some men suggested that polygamy was a way to motivate their wives to take care of their physical appearance out of fear for their husbands taking other wives.

"I think that it can be further developed but article 18 [prohibiting polygamy] should be removed this way we can find a solution to spinsterhood." (Male, Tunis, 24 years old, student)

"I think polygamy should be reinstated; it's better to know that my husband has a second wife with my full knowledge and permission than him having mistresses I don't know about. Plus, we now have a serious problem of spinsterhood." (Female, Sfax, 31 years old, technician)

Women found other social reasons to justify polygamy. Significant numbers of participants in all women's groups said they would feel more comfortable knowing that their husbands were married to other women, rather than having secret affairs. This suggests that there is widespread acknowledgement of infidelity and indicates a willingness on the part of wives to endorse polygamy to avoid the public shame of having unfaithful husbands. In a few cases, women also suggested polygamy as a solution for economic stability, as more wives could bring multiple incomes to the household.

"Polygamy should be re-instated, I'd rather have my husband marry a second wife with my consent and keep supporting us. For me, this is better than having mistresses." (Female, Tunis, 45 years old, teacher)

Urban women generally perceived themselves in a better situation than women in rural communities, who they claimed faced adverse social and economic conditions. Whatever difficulties they may have faced coming from urban centers, the women in the focus groups were conscious that social and economic conditions for women outside the governorate capitals are harder. Specifically, they suggested that women in the rural regions are far less aware of their legal and political rights.

"Women in rural areas need to be respected. They are totally deprived in terms of awareness-raising efforts and

cultural initiatives.” (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 25 years old, housewife)

“Rural women need to be educated on their rights, for instance in the case of divorce. This way they wouldn't be afraid to apply for divorce and they would know their rights.” (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 25 years old, housewife)

III. Common Social, Political and Economic Priorities for Women

Unemployment was identified as the highest priority issue for most participants across gender and region. There was a general perception across gender and age, with some exceptions, that men face more economic challenges than women. To support this view, participants shared the assumption that men have more responsibilities than women because they are expected to be the main breadwinners for the family.

“Men are more severely concerned with unemployment than women because women can get married.” (Male, Tunis, 34 years old, finance inspector)

“Men's challenges are more important than women's because men's responsibilities are heavier.” (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 19 years old, student)

“Men have more economic challenges given that they have legal, economic and social obligations as head of the family. Men's situations have been affected by the revolution. Even working peoples' dignities have been affected. It's not only the unemployed whose dignities have been affected.” (Male, Medenine, 25 years old, clerk)

Participants generally perceive that women and men have equal opportunity for jobs, but recognize that there are widespread and deep inequities in pay. Men from regions with the highest levels of unemployment expressed resentment toward employed women, especially those working in the public sector and factories.

“Women can have more job opportunities especially if they are pretty.” (Female, Tunis, 23 years old, housewife)

“Men feel they are being discriminated against and that there used to be a woman dominating the entire system. The number of women at universities outnumbers that of men, and women are more persevering with studies whereas men think that studies won't change anything and they think more about illegal immigration as the only solution. Women are more patient.” (Female, Medenine, 50 years old, medical technician)

However, men blamed women for benefiting more than men do from available job opportunities, based on the perception that more women are employed than men and more attractive to employers because they tend to accept low salaries. Women participants account for this by the commonly shared belief that women accept any job for any salary in order to make ends meet. A sense of guilt permeated their reactions to this unfair treatment of men in the labor market, which may lead to women participants' stated willingness to work part time for half of their salaries to create more job opportunities for men.

"It is true that more women are employed than men. Women should work part-time and allow more opportunities for others." (Female, Gafsa, 20 years old, student)

"If women work part-time for half of their salaries they can find more time to take care of their homes and allow some job opportunities for men." (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 24 years old, student)

Security was mentioned as a top priority by all participants but to different degrees. Women participants across different age groups and cities expressed an acute anxiety over their personal security. When describing expectations for a "perfect" Tunisia, for example, men tended to speak about the need for security forces to do their jobs properly and stick to their mandates. Women explained that they experience daily harassment on the streets and do not feel safe being outdoors or in public after dark.

"Arms are being smuggled into the country and the government isn't doing anything about this. [Arms smugglers] shouldn't be treated with impunity." (Female, Gafsa, 25 years old, housewife)

"I feel that the police do not respect women and in cases where women are harassed on the street it is the women who get blamed for that." (Female, Tunis, 25 years old, teacher)

This sense of insecurity was described as a relatively new phenomenon, especially among young women. Some women attributed the freedom and security that women used to enjoy in the past to the special status previous regimes granted to Tunisian women; though these rights date back to the time of former President Habib Bourguiba, many participants attributed them to former first lady Leila Ben Ali.

"I used to feel more secure when I go out at 3 a.m. Even if Leila Ben Ali imposed that freedom, I didn't really care. Now a high school kid can bother me." (Female, Tunis, 23 years old, MA student)

“Before women could go back home as late as midnight and they would feel perfectly secure. We are scared now.”
(Female, Tunis, 23 years old, student)

Young women, especially in Tunis, seemed to be more aware of and vocal about issues related to violence against women and sexual harassment in the streets and the workplace. They were equally outspoken about the need to penalize sexual harassment and all forms of violence against women, including verbal abuse. While sexual harassment as a problem was implied by women in other age groups and cities, it was never explicitly mentioned outside the Tunis young women's focus group.

“The Tunisian society needs to be sensitized but before that women should be granted specific rights and those rights should be firmly protected; any form of harassment needs to be penalized.” (Female, Tunis, 22 years old, student)

“Women's rights need to be respected; anyone who tries to assault women must be penalized, fined and jailed.”
(Female, Tunis, 23 years old, MA student)

“Verbal and physical violence must be penalized. Men don't have the right to hit their wives.” (Female, Tunis, 21 years old, student)

“We need to protect women's rights at home and at the workplace; sexual harassment must be prohibited and penalized.” (Female, Tunis, 25 years old, teacher)

IV. Avenues for Women's Political Participation

Despite an interest in politics, most participants, particularly young women, demonstrated low levels of political awareness. They may have heard of various political institutions or individuals, but could not provide details about what they knew of these institutions and individuals. Many participants blamed former president Ben Ali for having prevented Tunisians from developing political awareness, and admitted that they lack familiarity with laws and official entities.

“Women need to have more opportunities for accessing public life.” (Female, Medenine, 24 years old, housewife)

“The generations that grew up during the era of Bourguiba were more politically aware and knowledgeable. Ben Ali did a lot of harm to us by denying us knowledge and awareness.” (Male, Sfax, 32 years old, accountant)

"There is no equality in politics because women cannot be candidates for the presidency." (Female, Sfax, 33 years old, housewife)

"When I told my mother I would participate in a discussion group, she told me not to talk about politics." (Female, Sfax, 23 years old, student)

"Women have many rights but they are not implemented. These rights need to be implemented before women can ask for more rights." (Male, Mednine, 25 years old, unemployed)

"Is the Personal Status Code an organization?" (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 22 years old, student)

Both women and men participants viewed voting as one avenue for political participation for all citizens. However, while most participants reported having voted in the October 2011 elections, describing it as their civic responsibility, young women participants voted in significantly lower numbers. Many of them explained that the number of political parties competing in the elections confused them. Exceptions could be found in Gafsa (where only one young woman did not vote because she was not old enough at the time) and in Sfax. In the latter case, however, almost all young women in the groups reported having voted *only after* a few vocal participants proudly described their experience voting. Other women would subsequently claim having voted. It is therefore difficult to ascertain whether these women had actually voted or felt pressure from others to say so.

The majority of participants did not see any value in contacting local officials to participate in public life or resolve community issues. However, some young women reported having tried to contact ministry officials since the elections to resolve a problem or look for job opportunities, but claimed that their demands were ignored. Young women, especially in interior regions of the country, described feelings of frustration and hopelessness. They seek avenues to participate but are not aware of any new avenues that exist outside of contacting the government; they do not expect the government to provide adequate redress.

"I wanted to start a business so I tried to contact the governor, first there was a lot of paperwork and when I finally got to meet him he wasn't of any help. The government is a total failure. They talk about investment but nothing is happening. They don't really feel the hardship of the people." (Female, Gafsa, 24 years old, student)

"I know many people who have tried to meet the governor but they couldn't. That's why I believe it is useless." (Female, Gafsa, 20 years old, student)

"We wanted to contact some NCA members and officially requested to do so, but nothing happened." (Female, Tunis, 25 years old, teacher)

"I have tried to contact [Minister of Human Rights] Samir Dilou, and [Minister of Justice] Nouredine Bhiri; I went to both ministries and submitted requests and left my contacts but no one got in touch with me." (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 22 years old, student)

"There are some people who try to help but sometimes they get penalized for that. There's a program on Nessma TV called 'Nes Elkhir' [Good People], the local delegate in Jendouba tried to help the team when they shot an episode in Jendouba by going with them to the needy people. Then the governor of Jendouba fired him and now he is a police chief in Le Kef." (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 24 years old, student)

No one was able to name a woman who ran for the NCA in their region. If they recalled a woman campaigning, they struggled to remember her name. Participants rarely had opinions – either positive or negative – about the women candidates they saw campaigning in their regions. If the woman ran on the list for a party that succeeded in gaining seats, participants attributed her success to the political party. When discussing the election of women NCA members, participants attributed their success to the fact that they ran on a list of a successful party, rather than to their individual qualities as candidates. These comments were made in disparaging fashion, suggesting that both women candidates and parties were profiting in their own ways from the women's quota. The law on electoral list parity, if mentioned at all, was never viewed in positive terms.

"Most political parties talk about women's freedom/liberation but I have seen nothing and they tend to contradict themselves." (Female, Medenine, 22 years old, student)

"The question of the niqab is a matter of personal freedom; women are used as objects for very specific ends, Ennahda for instance used women to show that they are progressive and modernist." (Female, Gafsa, 25 years old, student)

"Women do not have an equal role in politics and the elections proved that we wanted up to cover our weakness in this regard by resorting to the law on parity. The three presidents we have now are all men and the women have totally been distanced." (Male, Gafsa, 19 years old, student)

Women politicians and elected officials have very low visibility. Both women and men expressed negative views of women NCA members. The overriding sense in each group

was that women are not playing a strong role in the NCA. Participants often criticized women in the NCA for not being more visible.

"I know [the women NCA members] as names, but I don't have any idea about their role in the NCA." (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 42 years old, department chief)

"The presence of women in the NCA is just a formality and they follow men." (Male, Mednine, 25 years old, unemployed)

"I've seen [NCA member] Maya Jribi talk in the NCA on many occasions. The other women don't and when they do they are interrupted." (Female, Sfax, 31 years old, unemployed)

There was, however, some recognition that women face more challenges than men, and that many obstacles have hindered their efforts to play effective political roles.

"Men are always given higher roles; women are not appointed in leading positions. In the NCA women are just pawns, unlike the men they don't benefit from their rights. The women continue to work at home and men don't do anything." (Female, Tunis, 50 years old, office clerk)

While unable to name women candidates and elected officials, participants could name several women who they considered to be influential in Tunisian society. This did not necessarily equate to positive influence. The most visible women – political and civic actors who are seen often in television interviews – were named, but not for specific reasons according to the participants. When probed to explain why they mentioned a certain woman, the participants were unable to explain. Women who were mentioned three or more times across all focus groups were, in order of declining frequency:

1. **Maya Jribi**, NCA Member (PDP/Republican Party), co-founder of the Association of Research on Women and Development (AFTURD).

"We respect Maya Jribi as an activist." (Male, Medenine, 34 years old, worker)

"In Gafsa, Maya Jribi is widely known for her boldness and courage long before the revolution." (Male, Gafsa, 42 years old, painter)

2. **Leila Ben Ali**, former first lady of Tunisia.
3. **Mehrzia Laabidi**, NCA vice-president (Ennahda), coordinator of the Global Women of Faith Network.

4. **Bochra Bel Haj Hmida**, lawyer, activist and member of the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (ATFD); ran for NCA elections on Ettakatol list for Zaghouane and then quit the party.

"I liked Bochra Ben Hmida when she was invited to a debate by Sami Fehri." (Female, Sfax, 31 years old, unemployed)

5. **Radhia Nasraoui**, lawyer active in the field of human rights for over thirty years fighting particularly against torture; co-founder of the anti-torture association.
6. **Sihem Benseddrine**, human rights activist, journalist, co-founder of the National Council for Liberties in Tunisia (CNLT) in 1998.
7. **Salma Baccar**, filmmaker, NCA Member (Democratic Modernist Pole).
8. **Kalthoum Kannou**, judge, activist, elected president of the association of Tunisian Magistrates in November 2011.
9. **Om Zied** (Neziha Rejiba, known as Om Zied), Tunisian journalist and editor of the online journal *Kalima*; co-founder of the CNLT and the Congress for the Republic (CPR) party in 2000.

"There are women who we have heard about after the revolution but Maya Jribi and Om Zied have been in the opposition even under the previous regime." (Female, Sfax, 37 years old, secretary)

10. **Lobna Jribi**, NCA Member (Ettakatol), newly-elected as NCA Central Committee Member.
11. **Olfa Youssef**, Tunisian writer and academic specializing in linguistics, psychoanalysis and applied Islamic studies.
12. **Saida Garraj**, Tunisian lawyer and former secretary general of ATFD.
13. **Samia Abbou**, NCA member (CPR) who replaced President Marzouki's vacant seat; Tunisian lawyer, activist and wife of the famous lawyer Mohamed Abbou.
14. **Souad Abderrahim**, NCA member (Ennahda).
15. **Sana Ben Achour**, public law specialist and former president of ATFD, member of AFTURD and the Collective Maghreb association (Le Collectif Maghrébin).
16. **Leila Ben Debba**, Tunisian lawyer, activist.

17. **Lina Ben Mhenni**, cyber-dissident, Tunisian blogger and journalist whose blog achieved worldwide fame during the Tunisian Revolution 2010-2011.

In each focus group, few people could cite the names of any active women's organizations. Most participants had heard of the Mothers of Tunisia (which existed under the previous regime) and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), but otherwise were nearly unable to name another organization. They also often misnamed the ATFD; opinions expressed about this particular organization were sometimes negative.

"[Women Democrats] organized a conference on women's rights that need to be constitutionalized. There is a huge difference between helping people financially and helping them by guaranteeing their rights constitutionally. ATFD have been active long before the revolution." (Male, Gafsa, 19 years old, student)

"There are good local associations, such as that of Women Activists in Regab; but they aren't active because they don't have the financial resources." (Male, Sidi Bouzid, 20 years old, student)

"[We know] the Democratic Women, but they have legalized some immoral matters....I attended one of this association's lectures by which they legalize adultery and also they claim the recognition of illegitimate children." (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 32 years old, student)

Given the limited knowledge of Tunisian CSOs, participation in civil society was unsurprisingly low. Some participants also cited a lack of initiative on the part of CSOs, suggesting that if they were more accessible, had more resources, or recruited more actively, these groups would have larger memberships. Interestingly, many women expressed a strong sense of support and relief for knowing that women's organizations exist in Tunisia to help other women, even if they were unable to name them. Women from Gafsa, Medenine and Sidi Bouzid in particular expressed a strong desire to participate in women's organizations, and say they would do so if they knew better how to access them.

"I believe that civil society associations have an important role in preserving women's rights." (Female, Sfax, 23 years old, student)

"I hope I can be one of these association's members." (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 23 years old, student)

"The role of women hasn't changed since the revolution. We should become active in associations and should not be

restricted to the job and the home.” (Female, Medenine, 50 years old, medical technician)

Men expressed a lot of negativity toward women’s organizations, either because they did not understand their work, or did not approve of their activities. They tended to dismiss the relevance of women’s organizations when they perceive there to be more pressing economic needs in the country. Associations that existed during the previous regime were more recognized despite being dismissed altogether as inefficient.

“These associations haven’t succeeded to convince women of their programs.” (Female, Tunis, 25 years old, teacher)

“These associations are creating problems. They talk about women on TV. What are the problems of women? They need to talk about unemployment instead.” (Male, Sfax, 24 years old, commercial agent)

“[These organizations] are always criticized by the government, the media and officials in general and this hinders the progress of their activities.” (Female, Tunis, 21 years old, student)

Participants generally found it challenging to imagine what the NCA could do concretely to support women’s rights, apart from preserving the PSC. The timing of the focus groups coincided with remarks made by Egyptian cleric Wajdi Ghoneim during a visit to Tunisia regarding female genital mutilation (FGM). Some participants discussed the need to protect Tunisian society from such practices. Other ideas included separating transport for women and men as a means of preventing sexual harassment against women in public spaces.

“For sure they should say something about women’s rights in the constitution in order to protect women from the intolerant mentality as the arrival of Wajdi Ghoneim and his story of girls’ circumcision.” (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 32 years old, student)

“We need to preserve the PSC and allow for polygamy but under certain conditions. Women shouldn’t be allowed to access certain jobs such as the judiciary field.” (Male, Medenine, 33 years old, clerk)

“Women’s right to work and participate in politics should be preserved.” (Female, Sfax, 19 years old, student)

“There should be laws for separate transport means for men and women for the sake of protecting women.” (Male, Tunis, 24 years old, student)

“All violence against women, physical, verbal, moral and economic, needs to be penalized. Women need to be protected and so do their freedom of beliefs.” (Male, Gafsa, 39 years old, engineer)

When participants proposed solutions for the problems women face – anything from lack of time to balance home and work responsibilities to pervasive sexual harassment – they favored solutions that accommodate women’s needs by separating them from the mainstream, rather than solutions that correct structural inequality. An overwhelming number of participants recommended that the government allow all women to work part-time for half of their salaries so that they could have more time to take care of household responsibilities and, if they choose, to participate in political and civic life. With the exception of one woman respondent, no participant suggested, for example, that men also have the right to work part-time or that employers provide daycare facilities so parents can work longer hours.

“Women should have the right to work part-time with half of the salary. But this should be optional and it shouldn't apply to all sectors.” (Female, Sfax, 23 years old, trainee)

“Administrative working hours are very long. Mohamed Abbou talked about the possibility of having Saturday off for the public sector and reducing lunchtime to an hour-and-a-half during weekdays. I think he should take into considerations the regional specificities. I prefer working for one session without a break and go back home early.” (Female, Medenine, 36 years old, inspector)

V. Regional Perspectives

Tunis: Participants expressed their situation as better off in comparison with other regions. The prevalence of job opportunities, better infrastructure, and access to administrative services and public transportation contribute to this perception. Still, several participants in each group noted that the increasing cost of living is adversely affecting their daily situations. At the same time, they acknowledged that the presence of investors and factories in Tunis – while detrimental to the potential of economic activity in other regions – helps maintain a level of economic stability for the capital. Tunis participants objected to what they perceive as a persistent culture of nepotism, bribery and corruption, particularly within government offices in their region. They also suggested that Greater Tunis needs more and cleaner public spaces, improved cultural facilities, and more reliable transportation. While men participants expressed relief that the security situation in Tunis is better than elsewhere, women perceived a lack of security and order since the revolution; young women in particular cited several cases of feeling personally insecure when in public after dark.

“Tunis, Sousse and Sfax are much better off in terms of security. In Sidi Bouzid for example, the police are no longer respected.” (Male, Tunis, 34 years old, unemployed)

“Tunis would be clean and I would take my kids to a good entertainment facility at the weekend. Tunis would be as clean as Paris.” (Female, Tunis, 45, teacher)

“As a student I wish there were better and more reliable means of transport.” (Male, Tunis, 24 years old, student)

“We should have a decent transportation system that preserves peoples’ dignities.” (Male, Tunis, 21 years old, student and part-time call center employee)

“Is it conceivable that when it rains water should leak into homes? I’m talking about the capital and the regions are just worse. Originally, I’m from Le Kef and when I go there the trip takes about three hours because of poor infrastructure.” (Male, Tunis, 21 years old, student and part-time call center employee)

Sfax: Overall, Sfax residents viewed their region's economic and security situation as better off than the rest of the country, citing the presence of factories and job opportunities as the main reasons. There were some exceptions; young women and young men, for example, expressed feelings of personal insecurity, especially when walking outdoors after dark. Participants across age and gender groups consistently mentioned the need to improve working conditions, the health sector, and urban infrastructure. The level of political awareness of Sfax respondents was comparatively low with that of participants from other regions, especially when they were asked about their knowledge of elected officials and the PSC. The level of interest in and awareness of women's rights in general was low across ages and genders, with few exceptions.

“There are no issues with security in Sfax, just like before. Here, you can dress and behave the way you like. It is said that the situation is different in other places where the fundamentalists are exercising a lot of pressure.” (Female, Sfax, 37 years old, secretary)

“Administrations and public institutions haven't stopped working in Sfax after the revolution. This is a solid foundation for the government to build on.” (Male, Sfax, 32 years old, accountant)

“As a unionist, our demands used to be taken care of before, especially when we insist on them. Now we get promises from the Ministry of Public Health but nothing more.” (Female, Sfax, 49 years old, midwife)

"People come from many regions to Sfax to work; there are more job opportunities here." (Female, Sfax, 23 years old, student)

"It is true that there are many job opportunities in Sfax but women, who work in factories, have long hours and they get paid eight dinars per day and their salaries are sometimes less than 200 dinars." (Female, Sfax, 23 years old, trainee)

Medenine: Both women and men perceived their region's situation as far worse off than the rest of the country, especially since the border with Libya, which used to be a hub for trade and commerce, is now closed from time to time. They expressed discontent that the government has neither paid attention to Medenine, nor prioritized investment there since the border closings with Libya began. Poor infrastructure and healthcare facilities were commonly cited as priority areas of concern. Participants also noted that even when a Medenine resident studies to become a nurse or doctor, he or she is sent to another region to work rather than returning to Medenine, because the region does not have adequate hospitals or medical equipment. This was cited multiple times as an example of a vicious cycle of limited employment opportunities. Men especially expressed concern with what they view as old practices of the former regime continuing at the local administrative level, preventing citizens without money or influential connections from starting a business. Despite the level of poverty and lack of organized civil society groups, youth in Medenine – in both women and men's groups – demonstrated a relatively high level of civic awareness. For instance, one participant described an initiative by local Medenine youth who organized a Facebook campaign to pressure local officials to stop allowing unauthorized street vendors to set up their displays in public spaces, and they succeeded. Both women and men lamented the lack of cultural offerings in Medenine, and some suggested that CSOs, if they were more present and active in the region, would be a great avenue for participation in public life.

"Medenine is worse off at all levels. In the Northwest and the Southwest there is agriculture. Here in Medenine the economy depends on Libya; we have neither agriculture nor tourism. In Djerba and Jarziz, people investing in the tourism sector hire their relatives from Sfax and the Sahel, they don't hire people from Medenine. The media is just focused on Sidi Bouzid. When the revolution started in Libya very little food was left in Medenine and Tataouine. The revolution started in Ben Guerdane as well but it was repressed. People in the south are shy; they are not loud about what they do." (Female, Medenine, 36 years old, inspector)

"Medenine is forgotten. Had it not been for Libya we would have had no resources at all. People here are very peaceful, shy and satisfied with what they have and they

don't make requests. Even the hospital where I work doesn't get the resources it needs and this dates back to the previous regime." (Female, Medenine, 50 years old, hospital technician)

"Medenine is really disadvantaged; when they talk about regional development, they talk about Gafsa and other locations. But Medenine is never mentioned simply because Djerba and Ben Guerdane are believed to generate resources for Medenine. We don't have any factories here." (Male, Medenine, 33 years old, clerk)

"In this governorate we have four major hospitals but the specialized doctors always prefer to work in Djerba and Jarziz and the same applies to equipment – the hospital in Medenine doesn't get any advanced equipment." (Female, Medenine, 40 years old, nurse)

"There are no entertainment facilities." (Female, Medenine, 22 years old, student)

"We have asked for railways in Medenine ever since I was student and we are still waiting. We have requested universities for the humanities and the law, infrastructure, nothing has happened. I am positive that any investment will succeed in Medenine because the youth are aware, they wouldn't set factories and institutions on fire." (Male, Medenine, 35 years old, employee)

Gafsa: While Gafsa residents perceive themselves as better off than people living in certain other locations in the center (i.e. Sidi Bouzid), they consider the region disadvantaged when compared to big cities and towns in the North (i.e. Tunis), the coast (i.e. the Sahel), or the South. Security was mentioned as a top concern among both women and men, especially in reference to local family-based conflicts – often described by locals as “tribal conflicts” – that occurred during the time the focus groups were conducted. Gafsa participants perceived themselves as deprived from their own resources, namely the profits generated from the phosphate industry based in their governorate. They lamented the government's lack of attention and proper response to environmental and health problems believed to be directly caused by the region's phosphate mining, such as poor drinking water that causes dental diseases, and even cancer. Women's groups especially feel frustrated by the region's lack of cultural centers, questioning why there are not more artistic offerings in Gafsa. Overall, both women's and men's groups demanded at a minimum that Gafsa have good road and building infrastructure and that citizens have decent living conditions. Notably, the Gafsa men's group insisted that their perceptions and ideas expressed during the focus group be shared with political decision-makers, because they believed their demands would be more easily heard by the government if shared by a research firm than by citizens themselves.

"When you compare Gafsa to Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, we are much better off but when compared to Tunis, Sfax, Gabès or the Sahel, then Gafsa is much worse." (Female, Gafsa, 45 years old, teacher)

"The situation in Gafsa is really precarious and what happened in Metlaoui is the best instance of how violence instigated by family clans caused deaths. Officials didn't know how to react to this." (Female, Gafsa, 36 years old, housewife)

"As long as the citizens of Gafsa do not enjoy its resources then the situation here is not good at all." (Female, Gafsa, 31 years old, housewife)

"Those who work in the company of Gafsa Phosphate (PGS) are from Sousse and Sfax when our accounting graduates are unemployed." (Female, Gafsa, 32 years old, housewife)

"The government has just realized that the company of Gafsa Phosphate is a treasure when for us it is the only resource and the only company. The water table has shrunk significantly (13 meters below its level) when this happens in another country this means an extreme emergency. The phosphate produces a substance that causes cancer and in Gafsa we don't even have a specialized doctor; if only a part of the company's profits is invested in a local hospital but that isn't the case. Many lands are not used when the nature of the land here is the best to grow lettuce." (Male, Gafsa, 19 years old, student)

"There are no clubs, no interest given for culture and arts in our region." (Female, Gafsa, 20 years old, student)

Sidi Bouzid: Sidi Bouzid residents showed the greatest level of frustration with their current condition. While participants perceive themselves better off in terms of security (they cited that the local police no longer harass individuals since the revolution), they perceive Sidi Bouzid to be much worse off than other governments in terms of employment opportunities, regional development, infrastructure, education and culture. All Sidi Bouzid participants consistently expressed dissatisfaction with the progress of the revolution, especially in their governorate. They perceived this as especially unfair in that Sidi Bouzid was the birthplace of the Tunisian revolution.

"We don't have many issues security-wise because Sidi Bouzid is a small governorate. But there are no regional development projects and employment opportunities." (Female, Sidi Bouzid, 24 years old, student)

*"The quality of the roads is very bad. There are no investment projects and no entertainment facilities."
(Female, Sidi Bouzid, 23 years old, student)*

*"Sidi Bouzid has the highest rate of unemployed graduates. Our parents have undertaken many challenges so that we can study. When we say Sidi Bouzid is better than other governorates, we don't owe anything to the government. We helped ourselves thanks to the level of awareness that we have."
(Female, Sidi Bouzid, 25 years old, housewife)*

*"The only option available for girls when they grow up is to get married and stay at home. This needs to change. There should be projects for women in rural areas."
(Female, Sidi Bouzid, 24 years old, student)*

*"When we say the revolution started in Sidi Bouzid they laugh at us because they underestimate us."
(Female, Sidi Bouzid, 24 years old, student)*

*"We don't have a home for the elderly in Sidi Bouzid. The marginalized that started the revolution are still disadvantaged. Healthcare access cards have been given to people who are well-off. We wanted to volunteer as youth and help guarantee peoples' rights, such as widows and construction workers. We have also called for the need to give jobs to those who are really in need. Instead of giving 200 dinars as an allocation for the unemployed those funds should have been used for the establishment of two or three factories that would hire all the unemployed. Sidi Bouzid has many natural resources but they aren't invested. The situation isn't clear; we don't know the employment criteria they are using."
(Male, Sidi Bouzid, 36 years old, unemployed)*

CONCLUSIONS

NDI offers the following conclusions as a foundation to encourage the political and civic participation of Tunisian women based on the priorities identified by the focus group participants. Offered in the spirit of cooperation, these conclusions are supported by recommendations made by Tunisian political and civic activists who attended a colloquium in March 2012, and involve engaging various actors within Tunisian society as a way to begin to change what appears to be a widespread mentality supporting a limited role of women in public and private life.

- 1. Visibility of women in the media is low and positive role models are lacking.** NCA member and party leader Maya Jribi and former first lady Leila Ben Ali were the two most consistently mentioned women who have had the most influence on Tunisian society. While other women were identified as being active in public life or recognized in the NCA, focus group participants struggled to name women who they considered as positive role models. Women role models in politics are critical for encouraging women citizens, especially young women, to participate in public life in various ways. As Tunisian women see more and more women playing a positive role in politics, civic activities, media and culture, they will be more likely to either think of themselves as potential leaders, to support women in public life and to develop a more positive perception of women political figures compared to women who were in the previous regime. The media can play a particularly effective role in covering the activities of women in politics on TV and radio. Organizations, both Tunisian and international, can also raise the visibility of women in public life through spot ads, documentaries and other communications.
- 2. Opportunities for women within political parties are limited but could be further exploited.** Citizens who participated in the focus groups were not convinced of women's individual merits when they were campaigning with or for a political party. Women and parties could mutually benefit from structures that bring together women members and provide a space to identify issues and policies that are most salient to women voters. Improving women's abilities to advocate on behalf of policies that concern women voters would combat the prevailing disconnect between parties' discourse and that of citizens. Women's party organizations can also help to identify and promote women leaders in local communities by empowering local party branch offices to engage women citizens. Such activities would be particularly welcome in underprivileged areas where women expressed a desire for more entertainment through public activities.
- 3. The visibility of CSOs, especially in the interior of the country, is limited but could be leveraged as another means for women to participate more actively in public life.** Thousands of organizations were created after the revolution, but they remain relatively unknown to Tunisian citizens. Despite the negativity expressed toward organizations that existed prior to the revolution – even if participants who expressed negative comments were unaware of these organizations'

activities – the focus groups revealed a consistently high level of interest among women in participating in civil society. Pursuit of roles in civic organizations was widely perceived as an acceptable avenue for women's political participation. Women who did not know which organizations existed in their regions also said that if they knew more about them, they may want to join them. They also expressed relief knowing that organizations exist in Tunisia to support Tunisian women. In places like Gafsa, Medenine and Sidi Bouzid, where opportunities for community action are infrequent, women said they wished there were more ways to get involved in local activities and issues. Civil society activities could be an effective way to engage women citizens in the community and thereby promote women's political leadership.

- 4. Gender-based discrepancies in public and private sector compensation are perceived as pervasive, however further research is required to determine the true scope of the problem.** The prevalent acceptance of salary inequality between men and women was an unexpected finding of the research. The extent to which gender-based salary gaps are seen as exacerbating unemployment among men and gender-based discrimination against women is cause for further examination. Civic organizations, research institutions and government ministries should consider conducting a deeper examination of why and where these gaps occur and propose legal and social remedies or programs to help close the gap.
- 5. Lack of credible qualitative and quantitative research on gender in Tunisia persists and should be supported by public and private institutions.** Focus groups do not provide a statistical sample of the population and may only be suggestive of public opinion writ large. While focus groups are designed to make participants feel comfortable, the social setting is still somewhat contrived. As people often behave differently when they are aware that they are being watched and/or recorded, focus group results often contain a certain amount of bias. While the research team is confident that in general the discussion was genuinely frank because participants spoke freely about the topics without prompting, it is possible that this knowledge may have influenced the conversation. Additionally, participants who took part in this research all had a minimum baccalaureate-level education and reside in urban centers of their respective governorates. It is quite possible, therefore, that the levels of awareness and opinions of less educated women and men, as well as those of women and men from rural areas, could be much different from those captured in this report. Research institutions, government ministries and national and international organizations may therefore consider complementing this qualitative research with other research methods, such as surveys, in-depth-interviews and national polling.