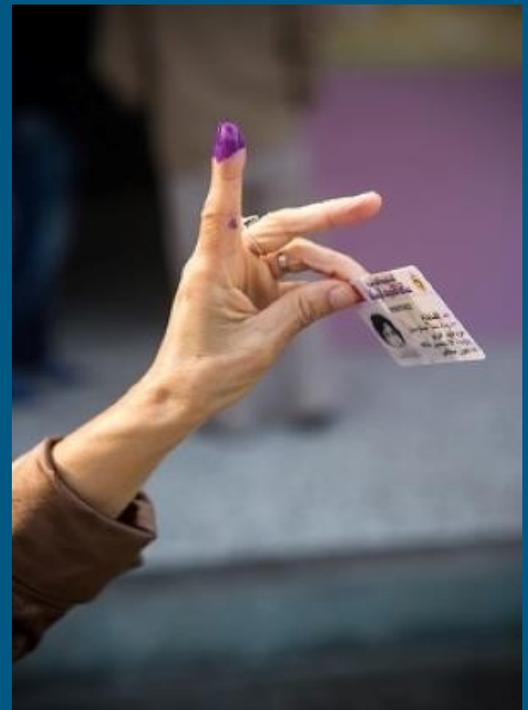


October 30, 2020

Exploring Women's Participation in Political Life in Tunisia With a Focus on the 2019 Elections



THE
CARTER CENTER



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Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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Executive Summary

In May 2019, the Carter Center deployed an international election observation mission to observe the presidential and legislative elections in Tunisia. Part of the mission's objective was to identify barriers to access and measure women's participation as voters, aspirants, candidates, and political actors against international rights and obligations. For this purpose, the Carter Center conducted 20 focus groups with 221 women in five cities around the country and 50 in-depth interviews with formal political actors and members of civil society organizations (CSOs).

This report details the research methodology and approach in assessing the status of women and barriers to their participation in various aspects of the electoral process and as stakeholders. It presents key findings and offers recommendations to all stakeholders to increase women's full political participation in future elections.

Key Findings. Despite constitutional commitments and legal measures in the electoral law to develop and protect women's civil rights since the 2011 revolution, Tunisian women continue to face significant political, societal, and economic barriers to achieve gender equality in politics, elections, and elected office. These barriers touch all women, from voters to aspirants and candidates to elected officials, and negatively impact their full political participation. Women's representation in parliament dropped from 35.9% to 26.2% following the 2019 parliamentary elections.¹ Only two of 26 candidates for president in 2019 were women.

Female candidates are disadvantaged by gaps in the gender parity provisions in the electoral law. They face material, social, and economic constraints to full political participation, including underrepresentation in party structures, marginalization from decision-making processes, and unequal access to resources during campaigns. Political parties also hinder women's political participation in the parties' role as political gatekeepers.

Although the High Commission for Elections (ISIE) conducted a successful registration drive, nearly closing the gender registration gap, these gains were not realized in participation at the ballot box. Some 78.5% of eligible women were registered to vote in advance of the 2019 polls—an increase of some 20 percentile points from previous elections. However, overall voter participation, including of women, has flagged substantially from 2014.² Available data shows that women voted at lower rates than men, with wide regional differences.³

¹ In 2014, 68 women were elected to parliament (31%). After a number of MPs resigned to join the government, that number increased to 72 (33%). By 2019, there were 78 female MPs (35.9%). In the 2019 election, women won 53 seats (24.4%). After a resignation in January and the government formation in February, that number increased to 57 (26.2%).

² Voter turnout for the legislative election in 2014 was 68.3%, compared to 41.7% in 2019. In the first and second rounds of the 2014 presidential elections, women's participation hovered in the low 60th percentile (62.7% and 60.1% respectively) compared to 49% and 55% in 2019. Information provided to The Carter Center by the ISIE.

³ The ISIE has not released voter participation by gender for the parliamentary or first round of the presidential election because data collection on the election days was disrupted. The ISIE has said this information will be included in the final report. According to information provided to The Carter Center by the ISIE, women represented 46% of voters in the second round of the presidential election.



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Women in the focus groups said they faced few technical barriers as voters and largely found the voter registration and voting process easy to access and understand. However, women's trust in political institutions has been severely undermined. Women have become increasingly disillusioned with the ability of political elites to act as agents of change and to distribute the gains of the revolution, leading some to opt out of the electoral process.

Recommendations

The Center urges the parliament, the governing coalition, the ISIE, and political parties to take comprehensive and holistic steps to address the structural, political, and cultural barriers that prevent women's full political participation. It is vital for stakeholders to devote resources to closing the gap between the *de jure* and *de facto* experiences of Tunisian women as citizens, voters, and formal political actors. These steps include amending legislation to ensure parity between men and women as heads of electoral lists, in the ISIE, and in leadership positions within political parties and parliamentary committees. The Center also calls for stakeholders to institutionalize relationships between women in parliament, government, and municipal councils to create a pipeline of female political actors and to create more robust opportunities for female voters and citizens to interact with their representatives. Additionally, fully implementing the Law Eliminating Violence Against Women is critical to promoting women's ability to exercise their full political participation.



Introduction

Research shows that women's participation in politics improves democratic governance, increases responsiveness to voters, enhances cross-partisan cooperation, and builds more sustainable peace efforts.⁴ Political transitions are particularly crucial junctions for women's rights as they present opportunities for advancement but can also leave women vulnerable to backlash and regression.⁵

Gender politics and women's rights emerged as a central feature of political discourse immediately after Tunisia's 2011 revolution. Partly as a way to grapple with Tunisia's long history of state feminism, discussions about women's rights served as proxies for bigger conversations on Tunisian identity, democratic transition, and the nature of the Second Republic. As a result, the interim governmental authority included a gender parity provision in the decree law governing the 2011 elections to form the National Constituent Assembly—the body tasked with drafting the country's new constitution.

The gender parity provision required vertical parity, i.e., alternation between male and female candidates on electoral lists. However, it failed to require parties to put women in the most advantageous position at the top of the list. With a 28% share in the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), women did not achieve parity, due in part to the limitations of the gender parity provision. However, the law did guarantee that women would have a voice in the constitutional drafting process, and Tunisia stood in sharp contrast to Egypt, where women won only eight of 508 parliamentary seats in 2012.

Alongside civil society organizations, women in the NCA crossed partisan lines to constitutionalize gender parity in 2014. During the subsequent drafting of the electoral law, they passed the same vertical parity provision from 2011 but were unable to garner enough support to also pass a requirement for men and women to head equal numbers of electoral lists, known as horizontal parity.⁶ In 2014, women won 31% of the seats in parliament. By the end of the parliamentary term in 2019, they held nearly 36%, ranking Tunisia 30th out of 193 countries for women's representation.⁷ Again, women worked together to pass a historic law to eliminate violence against women in 2016. They also successfully amended electoral law at the municipal level to include horizontal parity in 2017. As a result, 47% of municipal counselors are women.

Despite this progress, women have yet to achieve parity in parliament and have remained underrepresented at leadership levels within political parties and at all levels of government and political institutions. Only three women have ever run for president out of 53 candidates since 2014. The 21-seat decline in women's parliamentary share from the 2014 parliament was particularly disappointing given the role women played in the democratic transition and National Constituent Assembly.

Women's rights activists fear that progress on women's rights will stall as the number of women MPs continues to fall far short of reaching critical mass. Likewise, despite progress on women's voter

⁴ Cammisa, A. and Reingold, B., "Women in State Legislature and State Legislative Research: Beyond Sameness and Difference," *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 4 (2004); Rosenthal, C.S., "Gender Styles in Legislative Committees," *Women & Politics*, 21 (2001).

⁵ European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies, "Enhancing EU Action to Support Universal Standards for Women's Rights in Democratic Transitions: The Case of democratic transition in the MENA region," 2012.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2012/457119/EXPOJOIN_ET\(2012\)457119_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2012/457119/EXPOJOIN_ET(2012)457119_EN.pdf)

⁶ For the purposes of this report, horizontal parity refers to an obligation to nominate equal numbers of men and women as the heads of lists.

⁷ <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=8&year=2019>



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registration, election observers have noted that women voters have also proved to be a difficult group to mobilize since 2011.⁸

Following the 2019 elections, the Center aimed to measure women's political participation in the elections against international and regional rights and obligations and identify barriers to access. This report details the Center's research evaluating women's political participation in a number of domains, including in public life, the voter registration process, as voters on election day, as aspirants and candidates, and in governance, and offers recommendations to promote and develop women's political participation in the future.⁹

Methodology and Approach

In January 2020, the Center conducted focus groups in coordination with the Tunisian Association for Integrity and Democracy of Elections (ATIDE) and ELKA Consulting. Twenty focus groups with a total of 221 participants were conducted in five cities (Le Kef, Tunis, Sousse, Gafsa, and Medenine) representing five regions. Population, location, economic weight, and voter participation indicators were used to select the cities and the order was randomly determined.

Four focus groups were held in each location and targeted both registered and unregistered women broken down into two age groups—18-35 and over 35. Participants in all four focus groups were pre-screened to ensure diversity of location, education level, and profession. Registered focus group participants were pre-screened to ensure a mix of women who voted in any of the 2019 elections and women who abstained. All participants were compensated with 20 TND for participating in the focus groups and were reimbursed for travel expenses.

Before conducting the focus groups, the Center developed a moderation guide in collaboration with ATIDE and ELKA. Topics included: social, economic, and political issues facing participants in their communities, relationship to political elites and institutions, barriers to inclusion in registration and voting, interaction with campaigns and candidates, and women in politics. The focus groups were moderated by two members of ATIDE who had previously been trained in moderation techniques by the Carter Center and ELKA. All of the groups were conducted in Tunisian Arabic. Following the focus groups, the moderators, project staff and program manager contributed to the research analysis, assessment of key findings and recommendations.

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

To further refine its survey research and identify barriers facing women seeking elected office and working in politics and civil society, The Center conducted 50 in-depth interviews between December 2019 and March 2020. Interviewees included male and female MPs from a wide cross-section of political ideologies and parties, unsuccessful aspirants, and members of civil society organizations representing women and

⁸ The Carter Center, *Enhancing Citizen Participation in Tunisia: Final Report*, April 2019.

⁹ The death of President Beji Caïd Essebsi in July 2019 brought forward the presidential election according to constitutional requirements, and the ISIE was forced to organize three elections—presidential polls and a presidential runoff, and parliamentary elections—within two months. The compressed electoral timeline limited the Carter Center's ability to conduct pre-election research; thus, the survey research was conducted in the post-election period.



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minority rights, governance and human rights, and election observation organizations. The Center also interviewed representatives of the ISIE, The Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communications (HAICA), and the Court of Accounts.

Legal and Electoral Framework for Women's Political Participation

Tunisia is party to several international treaties that protect and promote women's rights and political participation. These treaties protect the free and equal participation in the public affairs of the country, including access to equal rights and freedoms without discrimination in all domains; the right to freely express opinions; and the right to free assembly without unlawful detainment.¹⁰ The international conventions also speak more specifically to women's access without discrimination to public life, government, public office, and policymaking—directly or through the election of representatives in free and fair elections.¹¹ Furthermore, international and regional covenants affirm women's equal *de jure* and *de facto* political participation—as informed citizens, as elected officials, and as voters—and recognizes the complex factors that can create distance between the two.¹²

The Tunisian Constitution is generally in line with international rights and obligations in the organization of its electoral framework. It guarantees universal suffrage and free, fair, and transparent elections. Voting is an individual right and the ballot is cast secretly. The constitution also guarantees freedom of thought and opinion to its citizens and affirms their right to access information.

The constitution also includes several articles related more directly to gender while separating women's rights from family rights, affirming individual rights with specific reference to gender, and establishing equal rights and duties in all domains. Article 34(2) establishes that the state will seek to achieve women's representation in elected councils without specificity in number or percentage. Article 46(3) specifies that the state shall seek to achieve “parity in all elected councils.” The language is aspirational, meaning that parity applies only to nominations and not to results. Article 46 also commits the state to protecting and advancing women's rights, equal opportunities, and “all necessary measures to eliminate violence against women.” In 2017, parliament passed a landmark violence against women law that criminalizes political violence.¹³

Electurally, Tunisia has a closed-list proportional representation system.¹⁴ Parties, coalitions, or independents submit ranked lists with candidates for each constituency equal to the number of seats in the constituency.¹⁵ The proportion of votes a list receives determines how many candidates per constituency become members of parliament (MPs). Gender parity in Article 46 of the constitution is elaborated in Article 24 of the electoral code, which mandates vertical parity for each list—male and female candidates

¹⁰ U.N., UDHR, Article 2 ; U.N. ICCPR Article 3 ; AU, ACHPR Article 2 ; U.N. CEDAW Article 3. U.N. CCPR Recommendation 25 ; AU, ACHPR Article 9(2) ; U.N. ICCPR Article 2. U.N. ICCPR Article 25.

¹¹ U.N., UDHR, Article 21 ; U.N. CEDAW Article 1 ; A.U., ACHPR-PW, Article 1. U.N. CEDAW Article 7 ; AU, ACHPR Article 13(1) ; U.N. ICCPR Article 25.

¹² U.N. General Recommendation 23 CEDAW, para. 22; A.U., ACHPR-PW (1) and (2).

¹³ Political violence is defined as “any founded act or practice of gender discrimination by which the perpetrator seeks to deprive the woman or prevent her from exercising any political, partisan, associative activity or any right or fundamental freedom.” Organic Law 2017-58 Law Eliminating Violence Against Women.

¹⁴ Organic Law 2014-16 of May 26, 2014 relative to elections and referendums, modified and completed by organic law N. 2019-76 of August 30, 2019, Article 107.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Article 22.



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must alternate.¹⁶ Lists that fail to respect vertical parity are invalidated by the ISIE. Unlike for municipal elections, for national elections, the electoral law is silent with regards to which gender should be placed at the top of the electoral lists, and/or whether parties must alternate between genders at the head of the list (*i.e.*, respect horizontal parity), or nominate a minimum percentage of women, between constituencies.

Although the legal and electoral framework largely aligns with international and regional conventions, barriers to women's full political participation as citizens, voters, aspirants, candidates, and in governance persist.

Women's Participation in Public Life

The international community has increasingly united political, economic, social, and cultural rights under the original framework of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁷ In essence, civil and political rights are considered indivisible from and interdependent on economic, cultural, social and human rights.¹⁸ The full access of women to these rights are preconditions for democratic legitimacy, and political empowerment can only be achieved by understanding it in the broader context of women's lives. Social and economic inequality, as well as unequal access to public life, contribute to the overall subordination of women and compromises their ability to access their full rights.

In Tunisia, despite the progress on women's rights since 2011, patriarchal gender norms persist. These norms uphold traditional gender roles and social expectations, relegating women to the private sphere and men to the public. Women can then face social, economic, or political rebuke for transcending that boundary.

Women in the focus groups identified the subordination of women, unequal social access to public spaces, and economic and regional marginalization as features that mitigated their full participation in public and community life. They also described an epidemic of violence against women, both in public and in private. Many of these issues have been exacerbated since 2011, contributing to women's dissatisfaction with the political status quo.

Subordination of Women: Women in the focus groups described feeling like second-class citizens in their own communities. The participants said that women are not free, and their behavior is socially policed in public.

"Everything impacts women's dignity, but nothing touches men."

Woman in youth focus group in Sousse

According to focus group participants, society looks down on women, marginalizes them, and considers them to be less than men. Women also said they feel their rights are not protected nor guaranteed in practice, despite the many laws protecting and affirming women's rights.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Article 24.

¹⁷ "Key concepts on ESCRs – Are economic, social and cultural rights fundamentally different from civil and political rights?" UNHR, Office of the High Commissioner.
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/ESCR/Pages/AreESCRfundamentallydifferentfromcivilandpoliticalrights.aspx>

¹⁸ These rights are set out in the foundational documents of the U.N., including The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ICCPR, The Convention of the Political Rights of Women, the Vienna Declaration, and the Beijing Platform.



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“Women have no value. Their rights are not protected even though there are all these laws and even a minister of women!”

Woman in 35+ focus group in Le Kef

Gendered Access to Public Space: With the relegation of women to the private sphere, many spaces outside the home are socially coded as male, particularly in the south and the interior. Women in the focus groups, particularly in Le Kef, Gafsa, and Medenine, highlighted the lack of safe spaces for entertainment for women and families. They said cafés are the only leisure spaces in their communities, and they are often socially inaccessible to women. These spaces function not only as commercial establishments but also as hubs of social and political activity. A poll conducted in December 2019 showed that 41% of respondents identified cafés as the main forum for political discussion, with households coming in a distant second at 18%.¹⁹ The lack of safe alternatives for women and children impacts their ability to participate in social political discourse, building wider social networks, and gaining the social clout and community repute necessary to run for public office and participating in elections as fully informed voters.

Violence Against Women: Women in all 20 focus groups highlighted the pervasive levels of violence they and other women around them experience in both the public and private spheres. In public, they said they face sexual harassment on the street and on public transportation no matter what they are wearing or how they are behaving. Participants said they then face victim-blaming whether they speak up or not. Participants feel particularly unsafe at night, exacerbated by the lack of streetlights and infrequent transportation at night. One woman in Gafsa said women are so afraid to go out after dark that even if they have a medical emergency overnight, they will wait until morning to go to the hospital.

While some say they felt safer with a higher police presence on the street before the revolution, participants now identify police as both enablers and perpetrators of harassment and violence. One woman in Sousse reported that she was assaulted by two policemen under the guise of a police search. When she spoke up and said if they wanted to search her, they had to take her to the police station, they took her in and filed charges against her.

“If you cannot feel safe with the police, how can you feel safe in front of ordinary men?”

Woman in youth focus group in Sousse

“There is nowhere we feel safe.”

Woman in 35+ focus group in Medenine

Participants and the women in their communities also face domestic violence at the hands of their brothers, fathers, or husbands. According to focus group participants, reporting these incidences to the police achieves nothing. Police refuse to believe women, accept bribes to do nothing, or say it is a private matter. Men with social power and money can use their influence to avoid repercussions. While participants lauded the passage of the violence against women law, they roundly criticize its lack of implementation.

¹⁹ Center for Insights in Survey Research, International Republican Institute, Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Tunisia December 3-December 15, 2019. https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/tunisia_final_slides.pdf



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“We don't need more laws, we need action.”
Woman in 35+ focus group in Gafsa

The pervasive violence that women face contravenes their right to dignity and personal safety. It compromises women's ability to safely and fully participate in community and public life.

Economic and Regional Inequality: Women in the focus groups also reported that women are denied equal employment opportunities. Female graduates are not recruited at the same levels as their male peers for white collar or government administration jobs. Participants also cited gendered pay disparity across sectors. Due to the state of the economy and the increasing cost of living, women are forced into the lowest-paying jobs, such as factory or agricultural work, and enjoy fewer labor protections. Women are also subject to unequal inheritance and landownership laws, which further curtails their ability to accrue wealth, be financially autonomous, or fund a political campaign.

“When the employer found out I was married and had children, he refused to hire me.”
Woman from youth focus group in Sousse

This marginalization is compounded for women who live in rural areas. Basic service provision is more intermittent for rural women, and limited access to transportation makes finding and traveling to work more difficult and dangerous. Women make up the majority of the rural workforce and face exploitative conditions, particularly in agriculture, which comprises 17% of rural female employment. Rural women are also more likely to be excluded from social security and parental leave.²⁰

“Rural women's lives are constantly in danger.”
Woman from 35+ focus group from Le Kef

Although the legal framework for the participation of women in public life has improved, women in the focus groups identified the continued subordination of women, unequal social access to public spaces, and economic and regional marginalization as features that mitigated their full participation in public and community life. They also described an epidemic of violence against women, both in public and in private. The Carter Center recommends devoting resources to fully implementing the law eliminating violence against women and employing a holistic approach to promoting women's political participation and access to their rights.

Women's Participation in Voter Registration

To ensure that suffrage is universal, registration processes must be accessible, with particular attention paid to barriers that confront marginalized populations, including women.²¹ Broad registration over the eligible population is a critical first step toward ensuring substantial voter participation and therefore democratic legitimacy. Comprehensive voter education on registration processes targeted toward women, and particularly rural women, is vital to promoting women's participation as they often have less access to

²⁰ Press release: Significant progress marking an advance for the human rights of Tunisian women, UN Women: Arab States, March 28, 2019. <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/3/press-release-significant-progress-for-the-tunisian-women>

²¹ U.N., ICCPR, Article 25 ; AU, ACHPR, Article 2 ; CEDAW General Recommendation 23, para 20(a).



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information.²²

In Tunisia, a gender registration gap emerged in 2011. In advance of the 2019 elections, the ISIE focused on registering eligible women in rural areas to help close this gap. They specifically recruited female ISIE agents, deployed mobile registration units, and gave regional coordinators autonomy to design a tailored registration strategy for their areas. According to the ISIE, this placed greater emphasis on schools, factories, markets, and going door to door, depending on the needs of the community. The ISIE's efforts were successful in helping to close the gap of registered voters; women now represent 49% of registered voters, and the share of unregistered eligible women decreased from 42% to 22% in the leadup to the 2019 polls.

The women in the focus groups faced relatively few technical obstacles in registering but revealed a need for better voter education on the registration and electoral processes, particularly for older women. The women in the focus groups used a language based on their rights and obligations as Tunisian citizens to describe their motivation for registering. Further, research revealed that unregistered women did not lack access to registration opportunities. Rather, they expressed little to no faith that their vote mattered.

Motivation to Register: The vast majority of registered women in the focus groups talked about their decision to register as exercising their rights and obligations as Tunisian citizens. They wanted to use their voice and be counted. Most described feeling excited about the prospect of registering and subsequently voting when narrating their registration histories.

"It's important. It will allow me to give my opinion and make my own choice. My voice makes a difference. I believe my voice can change things."
Woman from youth focus group in Medenine

By and large, registered women found the process easy to understand. They reported that information on how to register was readily available across traditional and new media as well as on posters in public spaces. They found the registration process simple and quick, facilitated in large part by the high numbers of ISIE mobile agents in public places, which made spontaneous registration accessible. Eighty-five percent of the newly registered women had gone to mobile ISIE agents.

Participants reported very few technical issues while registering. Two participants who were registering for the first time found themselves already registered or registered at a polling place that did not match their address. They said they were able to rectify these issues easily. For its part, the ISIE reported only 10 complaints from citizens regarding the registration process.²³

Challenges: Some barriers to registration faced by women were highlighted in the focus group discussions, mainly related to voter education. The discussions revealed some opportunities for improvement to the process:

- There was a generational gap in the level of existing knowledge on the registration process and comfort in finding out information. Participants under 35 were more readily able to describe how they would go about finding information.

²² CEDAW General Recommendation 23, para 20(a); U.N. (CCPR), General Recommendation, para. 11.

²³ The Carter Center, "2019 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in Tunisia," 2020, p. 7.



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- The ISIE's communication about the registration deadline did not reach a small minority of unregistered women. Several women said they had intended to register but had unknowingly missed the deadline. The majority of the focus group participants agreed that the registration period was too short.
- Both registered and unregistered women expressed confusion on the exact relationship and difference between registration and voting, often mixing up the two. More concerningly, both registered and unregistered women thought that one could register to vote via SMS with one's national identity card number and a USSID code. Some participants claimed to have registered in that way themselves, although such a system was only in place to inform voters of their polling station.²⁴
- All of the women in the focus groups had national identity cards at one point (some had lost theirs or moved and needed to apply for new ones). However, all the women in Gafsa, Medenine, and Le Kef reported that they did not carry their national identity cards with them unless they were traveling long distances. This means they would not be captured by spontaneous registration efforts by the ISIE in public spaces, unless they could be convinced to return a second time to the registration agent with their cards.

Refusal to Register: In the vast majority of cases, women who participated in the focus groups who were unregistered had encountered the opportunity to register, stating that they came across ISIE agents "everywhere we went." Many had even been explicitly asked to register but declined. With the exception of women over 35 in Medenine, unregistered women had family members, friends, neighbors, or colleagues who were registered and/or had voted in past elections. The vast majority reported that political discussion was common both socially and in their homes.

There were two categories of women who remained unregistered. Most unregistered focus group participants expressed political disillusionment and did not see a point in registering to vote. They said that they had lost hope, had not seen any progress or change, and that their vote would not change anything. Many also articulated that no party or candidate deserved their vote and that no one had earned their trust or confidence.

"I didn't feel encouraged to register. Nothing has been done and no progress has been made on previous promises. Nothing has improved since the 2011 and 2014 elections."

Woman in youth focus group in Le Kef

Others displayed political apathy and their decision to remain unregistered did not seem to function as an explicit political position. They cited that they were not interested in registering or it had never occurred to them. They also focused on lack of external motivation, saying they were not "pushed" to register or that no one convinced them to do so. These attitudes were concentrated among participants ages 18-35. However, some of these participants also affirmed the importance of registration and in having one's voice counted, nonetheless. They used some of the same rights discourse as their registered counterparts but appeared to lack mechanisms by which to actualize those ideals in their own civic behavior.

The gender gap in voter registration that emerged in 2011 has begun to close because of the focus of the ISIE in advance of the 2019 elections on registering eligible women in rural areas. As a result, women now

²⁴ This system was actually in place to check the correct polling station for registered voters.



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represent 49% of registered voters, and the share of unregistered eligible women decreased from 42% to 22% in the leadup to the 2019 polls. However, unregistered women continue to express disillusionment toward the political system and the lack of outreach from political parties in addressing their issues. The Carter Center recommends that relevant stakeholders concentrate on increasing women's buy-in to the democratic process through civic education. The Carter Center recommends that the ISIE collaborate with the Ministry of Interior to build a comprehensive strategy to reach women who lack national identity cards.

Women's Participation in Voting and on Election Day

International and regional standards affirm the right to vote, free will to choose candidates, and the secrecy of the ballot. Civic and voter education, as well as access to information on candidates and policy platforms, are also crucial to creating an informed electorate who can exercise their right to vote.²⁵

The women in the focus groups largely found the process of voting easy to understand and access. They identified two technical barriers—distance from polling stations and being overwhelmed by the legislative ballot. The women, supported by secondary and interview sources, also identified electoral violence as a barrier to participation.

More broadly, the focus groups were characterized by a clear breakdown in trust between the citizenry and political elites and institutions. The women expressed deep levels of frustration at the state of their quality of life, their local communities, and the country at large. Overwhelmingly, participants said that the political and economic situation had deteriorated since 2011, and that political elites have largely failed to distribute dividends of the revolution. Despite this, most women still expressed a willingness to participate politically in the future if they see tangible changes.

Motivation to Participate: Registered voters in the focus groups who voted in the 2019 elections described their motivation to vote in similar terms, explaining that they see voting as a right and a national obligation. Furthermore, it validates them as citizens of Tunisia. Others voted defensively, either as an anti-Ennahdha vote or to make sure that political elites were not stealing their votes and their voices.

"I vote; therefore, I exist."

Woman from 35+ focus group in Medenine

"When someone votes, they know their own value and know they are part of a community."

Woman from 35+ focus group in Gafsa

Election Day: The vast majority of participants who voted had a smooth experience on election day and were satisfied with the ISIE's organization of elections. They were able to find their polling places with ease, most using their cell phones to send an SMS and USSID code to receive a text message verifying their polling station. This indicates that voter education on this process was largely successful. The vast majority of participants were able to vote quickly and easily and felt that there were poll workers to help them if they needed it. They did highlight that the number of observers from CSOs was distinctly lower than in previous elections, registering that only ISIE and IRIE agents were present at their polling stations.

Despite a mostly easy experience, there were a few technical obstacles the women described:

²⁵ U.N. CCPR General Recommendation, Comment 25, para. 11.



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- Some women felt overwhelmed at the number of choices for the parliamentary elections and felt confused about how to find out more about them. Due to the number of parties listed on the ballot, they found it confusing and hard to read, and said that it disadvantaged older voters.
- Proximity to their correct polling station also functioned as a barrier to some voters. Students living in Tunis away from their hometowns were unable to return on election day to vote. Voters in rural areas said that available polling stations in their communities were too far away from their homes; they lacked transportation or did not have time to travel given their childcare and domestic duties.

Violence, Coercion, and Exclusion: According to polling in the runup to the elections, 57% of women surveyed were very concerned about election-related violence and 17% somewhat concerned.²⁶ Although the women in the focus groups were reluctant to speak openly about violence against women in elections or familial pressure, they all said they knew of women whose vote and political participation had been controlled by the men in their families. This was particularly present in the focus groups with women over 35.

The Tunisian Mediterranean Center (TU-MED), a Tunisian CSO, tracked rural women's experiences in seven constituencies during campaigns and on election day.²⁷ They observed 365 cases of women being forced or coerced to vote a certain way by having their identity cards withheld, through vote-buying, or through intimidation. They also observed three cases of women being harassed and intimidated out of attending a campaign event.

TU-MED also found that most campaigns did not target women. Parties held events in spaces inaccessible to women, such as cafés or by driving around the streets to talk to men. When women did attend campaign events, campaigners would pass over them when handing out materials. TU-MED also reported that campaigns were mostly concentrated in urban areas, which were largely inaccessible to rural women.²⁸ Consequently, women, and in particular rural women, had fewer opportunities to access and evaluate policy platforms of candidates and parties.

Reasons for Abstaining: For some, disillusionment at the lack of progress since the revolution and the continuing hardship they experience in their daily lives has made them feel their vote is useless. Trust in the system to address their needs has been dashed too many times.

²⁶ Center for Insights in Survey Research, International Republic Institute, "Data: Tunisians Pessimistic About Electoral Process", 28 March 2019.

https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/final_012019_iri_tunisia_poll.pdf

²⁷ TU-MED monitored election activities in Gafsa, Sidi Bouzid, Jendouba, Siliana, Kasserine, Tozeur, and Kebili.

²⁸ TU-MED, Initial Report on Observation of the First Presidential Election, 2019; Initial Report on Observation of the Second Presidential Election, 2019; Initial Report on Observation of Legislative Election, 2019.



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“In 2014, I had a little confidence, so I voted. I lost that for 2019. Things are changing negatively. In 2024, if things do not get better, I won't vote then either.”

Woman in 35+ focus group in Le Kef

“Either we vote, or we don't vote. It changes nothing.”

Woman in 35+ focus group in Medenine

Similar to those who refused to register, most nonvoting participants said they had friends and family who voted and were exposed to political discussions in their social communities. Nevertheless, a large portion of abstainers expressed general apathy about voting; their abstention did not result from an explicit political stance or choice. Rather, they lacked external motivators, as in “no one pushed me to vote,” voting had never occurred to them, or they just did not feel like voting.

Many nonvoting focus group participants expressed regret that they had missed out on the opportunity to vote for Kaïs Saïed. Almost uniformly this regret seemed to stem from feeling left out of the celebration after he won. They said they wished that they had been able to participate in it and viewed their lack of engagement as a form of social exclusion.

“The election day was like a wedding party! It was a source of pride for us Tunisians.”

Woman in youth focus group from Tunis

Relationship to Political Elites and Institutions: The focus groups were conducted in January amid the political crisis resulting from the fraught process of government formation.²⁹ After months of negotiation, the Ennahdha-appointed prime minister, Habib Jemli, failed to win a confidence vote for his cabinet on Jan. 11, 2020. On Jan. 20, the president appointed a new prime minister, Elyes Fakhfakh, who managed to cobble together a governing coalition with participation from 10 parties. With the specter of the dissolution of parliament and the possibility of snap elections, the Fakhfakh government finally received a vote of confidence in parliament on Feb. 26, 2020, nearly five months after the elections.

Frustration at the political infighting and stagnation, and the general status quo, was a defining feature of the focus group discussions. This frustration was grounded in the feeling that the state has failed to distribute the dividends of the revolution and the lives of everyday Tunisians have worsened since 2011. This fueled participants' disillusionment and anger with political elites and institutions, defining their relationship to them.

Unemployment was the biggest concern for participants in all 20 focus groups, including long-term, chronic unemployment and also youth unemployment for university graduates and non-graduates. Participants described clientelism and having existing connections as the only pathway to employment; consequently, women especially are forced into low-paying jobs outside their degrees or training given their decreased access to social networks.

These dynamics are exacerbated by the ever-increasing cost of living and rate of inflation. The women described the difficulties they faced buying the bare necessities for their families. This level of economic insecurity has now expanded to middle class families as well. In addition, inadequate access to basic

²⁹ Focus groups were conducted Jan. 4-9, 2020, in Le Kef, Tunis, and Sousse, and Jan. 18-22, 2020, in Gafsa and Medenine.



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services impacts the daily lives of all focus group participants. Participants described having to travel on poorly maintained roads and infrastructure with infrequent or insufficient transportation; inconsistent and unaffordable access to electricity and water; and poorly maintained, stocked, and staffed hospitals. These issues are compounded for participants living in rural or more remote areas.

Relationships between Voters, Candidates and Political Parties: Women in the focus groups reported having little to no substantive engagement with campaigns. Campaigners who approached them on the street or came to their door would just hand them flyers and leave. Subsequently, participants' recall about the content of specific campaigns was vague and few could repeat any specifics.

“Men and women go door to door, but they aren't convincing at all. They aren't sufficiently trained to answer our questions.”

Woman in youth focus group from Le Kef

The women described how campaigns and candidates did not differentiate themselves policy-wise. Rather, they all made the same big promises to address generic issues in the campaign. The women felt deceived by political parties whose candidates run campaigns that speak to their issues and then fail to produce any concrete results. Participants also noted that this is particularly true for women's issues.

“We trust no one; women are abandoned. They don't do anything. They talk about these issues; they know about them. But they never take any action.”

Woman in 35+ focus group from Le Kef

As a result, the women described political parties with anger, viewing them as corrupt, inefficient, and clientelist. Partisan politicians and party members were described as power-hungry and wholly uninterested in public service. They noted that people only join political parties based on promises of employment and because proximity to political parties can improve someone's personal circumstances. Partisan membership was also described in moral terms. Participants said that one has to be a “bad person” to join a political party. Those who do start with good intentions quickly become morally bankrupt and any orientation toward public service evaporates and is replaced by self-interest.

“They want to be elected. But why? They want to work for their own personal interests. They always say they will work for the people, but when they win, they forget all about them and only work for themselves.”

Woman in 35+ focus group from Gafsa

Consequently, women voters described voting based on perceptions of moral goodness and fidelity, rather than on policy platforms. While the legislative debates did not feature at all in participants' descriptions of their voter choices, the second presidential debate was a defining moment for their support of Kais Saïed. They assessed Saïed's performance as impressive, articulate, and, alongside his lack of partisan association, proved his incorruptibility and trustworthiness.

Attitudes toward Parliament: The attitudes of women in the focus groups toward MPs and parliament featured largely as an extension of their feelings toward political parties. As noted above, participants feel abandoned by candidates who make sweeping promises and then fail to deliver. Women in marginalized and rural regions complained that once their representatives leave for Tunis, they forget their regions, fail to advocate for their constituents, and seek only personal power. Participants largely held parliament



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responsible for the lack of progress in Tunisia and are tired of seeing the same people re-elected that failed to deliver on their 2014 campaign promises. Participants perceive parliament to be a highly dysfunctional and corrupt institution, particularly within the context of the drawn-out and frustrating formation of the government.

Attitudes toward the Office of the President: President Kaïs Saïed was the only political figure toward whom the women in the focus groups extended any kind of goodwill. His lack of party affiliations, his reputation for resisting corruption, and the groundswell of support he received from Tunisia's youth positioned him as the antithesis of everything Tunisian politics had come to represent. He remained the only person the participants trusted to improve the country's situation, with the notable exception of participants from one location, which was home to a different presidential candidate.³⁰ In general, the women expressed extremely high expectations of Saïed and understood parliament to be his biggest roadblock.

"I trust the president...if they [parliament] will let him work."
Woman in youth focus group in Tunis

Institutional Nostalgia: By and large, women in the focus groups identified legislative elections as more important in general because of the greater allocation of constitutional powers to parliament versus the presidency. However, most participants also stated that the presidential election of 2019 was more important than the legislative election. Although this was a seeming contradiction, it was based on the perception that Saïed represented a sea change in Tunisian politics, despite the limitation of his office. This dynamic suggests an element of nostalgia for the prerevolutionary organization of power, one in which more power is concentrated in the hands of the president.

Despite this clear breakdown between elites and the electorate, the vast majority of both registered and unregistered women showed a willingness to continue participating in the democratic process in the future if the state is able to deliver tangible changes. This dynamic suggests that as state authorities build trust between the state and the people, women too will become increasingly active politically.

Women's Participation as Aspirants and Candidates

Women's equal right to participate and stand for election at all levels of government, to be represented equally in electoral processes, and compete on a level and equal playing field are essential for democratic elections.³¹ Political parties are also obliged to show a commitment to gender equality within their bylaws, implementation, and in decision-making bodies.³² Finally, the international community recognizes that removing *de jure* barriers to women's participation as candidates in electoral processes is not sufficient to guarantee women's equal access. Consequently, states must endeavor to address *de facto* barriers to access

³⁰ Women in Gafsa expressed mildly positive feelings toward Saïed. However, Safi Said, two-time presidential candidate, 2019 MP, and famous journalist, was described as "a son of Gafsa" and inspired the most confidence and trust.

³¹ U.N., ICCPR, Articles 3 and 25; A.U., ACHPR, Articles 2 and 13; U.N., CEDAW, General Recommendation 23, para. 22; A.U., ACHPR-PW, Article 1.

³² U.N., CEDAW, Article 7(c); U.N., CEDAW, General Recommendation 23, paras. 34.



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when developing appropriate measures to combat discrimination against women in political life.³³

In in-depth interviews, women described numerous barriers they faced as aspirants and candidates. These include gaps in the electoral law, the way that power and resources flow through political parties, and inequalities on campaigns, such as noninclusive political spaces, lack of access to media, and gendered double standards and political violence.

Electoral Law and Horizontal Parity: The results of the parliamentary elections highlighted the inadequacies of the gender parity provision as a guarantee of women's representation. The parity provision requires vertical parity (alternation on electoral lists between genders) but does not require horizontal parity, or equal numbers of men and women at the top of the lists. As a result, only 14% of the lists were headed by women in 2019, a marginal increase from 11% in 2014 and 7% in 2011. The large number of political parties that operate in Tunisia, coupled with the list-based system, creates significant emphasis on list order.³⁴ Because of the low numbers of female-headed lists, women's representation is dependent on parties' winning more than one seat per constituency.

The state of the political field in 2014 translated into parliamentary gains for women. The election was dominated by two major parties: Nidaa Tounes, the big tent secularist movement whose leader and recently deceased founder served as Tunisia's president from 2014-2019, and Ennahdha. Nidaa Tounes and Ennahdha collectively made up 72% of the parliament elected in 2014. Each party won at least two seats in 24 out of 33 constituencies. Consequently, despite making up only 11% of the heads of lists, women won 31% of the seats.³⁵ By 2019, Nidaa Tounes had collapsed and split into several different parties. Ennahdha also faced internal dissent and strong rebukes from the general population for having been in the governing coalition since 2011. As a result, the electorate scattered support and the number of parties in the 2019 parliament nearly doubled. This dynamic drastically reduced the number of parties that won more than one seat per district. Tunisia also uses the largest remainder method to allocate the last seat within each district, which could increase the number of lists that win only one seat, further disadvantaging women who are rarely head of list.³⁶

In this way, women's representation is dependent on Tunisia's shifting political landscape. This creates a *de facto* ceiling on their presence in parliament and shuts out women from smaller parties.

Political Parties: Aside from the lack of obligatory horizontal parity, female MPs and internal operatives identified political parties as the biggest obstacle to appointing women as heads of lists and to promoting women as candidates. According to interviews with women activists and candidates, political parties are largely the gatekeepers of candidacy and display a significant male bias when nominating candidates. Often decision-makers blamed the conservatism of the electorate and their unwillingness to accept women as candidates to justify the male bias at the heads of the lists. However, interviewees were adamant that political parties are just as patriarchal as society, if not more so.

³³ U.N. CEDAW Art. 7, General Recommendations 23, paras 15 and 22; A.U., ACHPR-PW, Articles 1 and 1(d).

³⁴ As of June 2020, there were 221 registered political parties.

³⁵ After the government formation, women's share of parliament increased to 33%. By 2019, women held 35.9% of seats.

³⁶ The largest remainder method assigns a number of votes required to win a seat in a given constituency. The number of votes a list receives is divided by the number of seats available, resulting in an integer and a remainder. Any leftover seats are allocated to lists with the largest remainders.



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The women in the focus groups also identified the patriarchal mentality of men and society as a barrier for women in politics. The women themselves, however, denounced the low presence of women in politics generally and were in favor of more women in political life and in parliament. They asserted that men and women were equal, and politics should reflect that stance. Furthermore, participants strongly felt that women understand women's issues better than men and would be stronger advocates for them. Some were concerned about tokenism and felt that some of the political parties only include women because of the legal obligation and choose unqualified women. Women expressed reservations about the idea of a female president, although they had a difficult time articulating why.

Underrepresentation in Political Parties: Political parties are heavily male-dominated institutions. There are 221 registered political parties in Tunisia; only three are led by women. Both female presidential candidates—Abir Moussi of the Free Destourian Party (or *Parti Destourien Libre*, PDL, as it is known in French) and Selma Elloumi Rekik of *Al Amal*—head their respective parties. Olfa Terras is the head of an NGO that put forward electoral lists in 2019.

Women are universally underrepresented in local, regional, and national party structures across the political field. Moreover, according to interviewees, women who do work within the political party often occupy administrative roles, not as leaders or decision-makers. One political operative described a glass ceiling—in her party, a sizable number of women occupied midrange positions but were very rarely in positions of power.

Marginalization from Decision-Making: Women who have managed to climb the ranks in political parties consistently describe being vastly outnumbered.³⁷ But the problem is more extensive than just being a minority in the room. Interviewees describe having to fight hard to be heard at all. One member of a central committee said that unless a meeting is structured as a roundtable, where everyone speaks in turn, she has to shout down the whole room. One former MP who had helped found a prominent party after the uprisings said she's watched countless men try to alienate their female counterparts by turning their bodies away while they are speaking or refusing to look at any of the women in the room.

“Oh, you're here? Fine. You can talk now.”

Female party member describing her male colleagues' attitudes in a central committee meeting

Finally, women reported that sometimes being in the room with a seat at the table is obsolete anyway. Decisions are often made informally, outside of work hours, in cafés, bars, or someone's home—excluding women with domestic responsibilities and who are also limited in the social spaces they can access.

Nomination Processes and the Legitimacy Gap: Electoral list nomination procedures and levels of institutionalization differ across parties. In in-depth interviews, female MPs, aspirants, and candidates described facing a gender legitimacy gap, regardless of the structure of the nomination procedure. In order to be considered as a candidate, women must have more extensive experience, be more articulate, and have more impeccable credentials than their male counterparts.

³⁷ For example, Haraket Echaab's national council has only four women out of 250 members. Attayar has two women of 19 people on the political board and only one out of eight on the executive council. Ennahdha's 150-member Shura council has never had more than 20% women members. Female members of Ennahdha have been trying to pass a 30% quota for women in the Shura council since 2013 but have never been able to garner enough support.



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“Women need to be four times more competent than men ... to access public office positions.”

High-ranking female party member

“A man walks in the room and everyone assumes he's competent. A woman walks into a room and she must prove herself.”

Woman MP in parliament

Ultimately, though, women say that it comes down to a lack of political will within the party to nominate and support women at the heads of the lists, rather than the conservatism of the electorate or their willingness to accept female politicians. In fact, Ennahdha held regional elections and nominated women to head 17 of 33 lists. Party leadership intervened and replaced 13 of those women with men.

This legitimacy gap means that a woman must work harder to attain and maintain credibility throughout her political career. Interviewees pointed to women's high attendance records in parliament and in the 2011 constituent assembly, reporting that women are often doing the heavy lifting behind the scenes in committees and in administration. Female candidates in the second position on the list were often described as the “engines of campaigns,” providing vital strategic and logistical support to the head of list. Ultimately, however, these displays of competence and hard work rarely translate into public office, power within the party, or nominations at the head of the list.

Finance: Finance can also act as a barrier to access. Proportional, closed-list systems limit the role of individual finance in elections more than in first-past-the-post systems. However, the structure of Tunisia's campaign finance system leaves some space for aspirant wealth to play a role. Individual donations from members of the list is one of the three types of allowable campaign funding.

Women have less access to wealth in Tunisia than men because of pay disparities and unequal inheritance and landownership laws. This can impact their potential value as candidates and their ability to run an effective campaign. The report of a study on political finance and gender in the 2011 and 2014 elections found some indications that individual wealth played an important role in nomination and list placement, but as one of several factors.³⁸ Although respondents were often reluctant to discuss the role of finance in nomination procedures, interviews generally corroborated the finding.

“Competition was much more fierce and political considerations took the upper hand. There were those who could ‘pay’ for their spots and fund their own electoral campaign.”

Executive committee member

Some interviewees suggested that maybe women should eschew the party system altogether and instead create their own independent lists. Others who worked on capacity building for women on independent lists say that's not the answer. An independent list is even more dependent on the personal wealth of its members, as it is unable to benefit from the financial support of a party's infrastructure.

Gender Division of Domestic Labor and Space: Traditional gender roles position women as responsible for the domestic sphere regardless of their obligations outside the home, be they political, associational,

³⁸ IDEA and Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, “Political finance and the equal participation of women in Tunisia: a situation analysis,” 2016. <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/political-finance-and-the-equal-participation-of-women-in-tunisia.pdf>.



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educational, or economic. Politics is a time-intensive endeavor; campaigning and governing can go long into the night and start early in the morning. Women's domestic responsibilities strain their ability to devote the time and energy required for political office and forces them to take on a double burden. Women who do choose to enter politics are required to make bigger sacrifices. If elected, women often have to leave their family behind to work in Tunis. They then risk social rebuke if seen to be "abandoning" children, family, and home. This can also cause feelings of internalized guilt for defying these social obligations.

"Why aren't you home taking care of your kids?"

Woman MP in the ARP describing an incident with a voter in a café

"I've been attacked for being single; people tell me I'd better stop and find a husband."

Female civil society activist

In addition, sometimes campaign events are in male-only cafés and spaces, which are socially inappropriate for women to enter. This put female candidates in an uncomfortable position—miss a meeting or an event or risk social punishment and hostility for crossing a social boundary. One MP said his party cannot afford to rent out headquarters across the country. He said it was impossible to find a gender-inclusive space to hold party meetings to discuss campaign strategies.

Access to Media on Campaigns: The HAICA's report on candidates' access to television and radio coverage showed unequal gendered access and determined that gender parity was not respected.³⁹ The two female presidential candidates ranked near the bottom of every metric, including minutes on political talk shows and newscasts, as well as minutes devoted to coverage of their campaigns. Female parliamentary candidates were similarly shut out of television and radio coverage. As presidential candidates, party leaders, and heads of lists are the most sought-after television and radio guests, meaning that women are structurally disadvantaged. However, even taking into account the disparity between female and male heads of lists, women were disproportionately underrepresented.⁴⁰

Interviewees attributed the gendered media disparity both to parties and the outlets themselves. They asserted that political parties do not distribute media opportunities equally between male and female candidates or surrogates. Simultaneously, media outlets often ask for the most well-known or controversial political figures, which are often men. The truncated election schedule in 2019 also played a role. The presidential elections drowned out coverage of the legislative election.

The radio station *Shems FM* proved the outlier, devoting nearly half of its airtime to women. According to a media watchdog organization, the president of *Shems FM* committed the station to parity between men and women during the campaign.

Women in the focus groups noticed, and were bothered by, the diminished access that women had to the media, both as candidates and as political commentators. They agreed that it should be equal and that the disparity in coverage posed a disadvantage to most female candidates. As a solution, participants argued that women needed to impose themselves, using Abir Moussi and Samia Abbou as examples of female politicians who had broken through and, in Moussi's case, were highly visible in the media.

³⁹ HAICA, "Final Report on the 2019 Legislative and Presidential Elections," 2019.

⁴⁰ For example, the two female presidential candidates ranked last and third from last in speaking time on political television shows and newscasts. For the parliamentary elections, more than half of television stations devoted less than 10% to female candidates—less than the percentage of women at the heads of lists.



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Political Violence and Gendered Double Standards: Women candidates cited the different ways that the public, media, and other political actors interact with men and women. Interviewees reported that male candidates received questions about or criticism of their ideas and political performance, while female candidates are judged and challenged on their appearance and personal life. Often these came in the form of attacks or smears that were sexual in nature and meant to damage a woman's honor and reputation. Civil society activists who work with potential female aspirants on capacity building and political strategy said the very public potential humiliation served as a deterrent for women who would otherwise aspire to enter politics. This is backed up by polling data stating that 74% of women polled said that fear of violence deters women from running for office.⁴¹

"It's very different the way that women are attacked. Always attacked on a personal level: the way she looks, she's stupid, she got a haircut. Men are attacked on what they're saying, their ideas."

Woman MP in parliament

"The first thing that women are attacked for is their bedroom."

Woman MP in parliament

ATIDE monitored social media during the presidential and parliamentary campaigns. They found that the legislative campaign was largely negative and focused on attacking opponents and not policy platforms. "This included disinformation and misogyny towards some female candidates."⁴² Interviews corroborated this finding. Some female candidates described a few incidents with members of the electorate, both online and on the campaign trail. However, the majority of gendered attacks came from candidates in rival parties and sometimes from within their own party.

Visible party support proved successful at curbing some of the gendered vitriol women candidates faced. Several women from different parties stated that their respective parties deployed well-known leaders to join women's campaigns to give them some institutional cover. Others said their parties increased the number of party members in a female candidate's team. Embedding women candidates more visibly within party structures and clearly communicating institutional support had an insulating effect.

Prospects for Change: Almost universally, the women interviewed strongly believe that the only way to increase women's access to parliament, and to break the glass ceiling on the presidency, is to require horizontal parity on candidate lists in national elections and internal parity within political parties' leadership structures. Advocates of horizontal parity believe that male politicians will never choose to promote women within the party or voluntarily give up half of their power within the leadership of political parties or on electoral lists. They believe that the obligation to place women at the heads of lists would force parties to substantively invest in their female members and incentivize the party to put its full weight behind women.

⁴¹ Center for Insights in Survey Research, International Republic Institute, "Data: Tunisians Pessimistic About Electoral Process," 28 March 2019.

https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/final_012019_iri_tunisia_poll.pdf

⁴² Democracy Reporting International, "Monitoring of electoral campaigning on social media: Tunisia. 2019 presidential and legislative campaigns," 2020, p. 33.



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“Men will never choose willingly to give up half of the available positions to women, in the party or on the lists.”

Woman MP in parliament

“Men in political parties fear that women will take their positions. It's not about mentality, as we have seen during the municipal elections, there are many women mayors even in internal regions. There was no refusal by the citizens. We found a lot of trust from the citizens.”

Woman MP in parliament

“They need to be obliged otherwise they will never do it.”

Female party member

Horizontal parity and internal parity within parties, however, will not address all the barriers to inclusion for female candidates. Veteran women in politics have seen firsthand how a legal obligation trickles down to ameliorate other mitigating factors. For example, since vertical parity was instituted in 2011, there has been a change in discourse. Women MPs described how the presence of women in the 2011 assembly and 2014 parliament publicly proved women's competence to voters and, to a certain extent, their male contemporaries. Previously, party leaders cited a lack of competent women as one of the main reasons for a gender disparity in politics; this argument featured much less prominently in 2019. In addition, during the municipal elections, when parties were obliged to head half of their lists with women, it became easier for female candidates to venture into socially male spaces, like cafés, by virtue of magnitude and sheer necessity.

Women political leaders said support for horizontal or internal parity is by no means universal among MPs and party operatives, including some women. Common arguments against horizontal parity are varied. Some think it would place an undue burden on small political parties that have fewer members from which to draw candidates. Others said that Tunisian women are strong and competent enough on their own—parity provisions only humiliate them and promote tokenism. Others make a bad-faith feminist argument, saying that gender parity laws prevent an all-female list. Finally, some advocates said they worry political parties would always find a way around truly investing in women as political actors. They expressed concern that parties would only nominate women as the head of a list in noncompetitive constituencies if horizontal parity is required.

Since 2011, it has essentially become a political necessity for parties to claim that they support increasing women's presence in parliament. Horizontal parity advocates, however, have found little actual political will within parties to back those claims. In parliament, cross-partisan groups of women, rather than parties or blocs themselves, have led the charge on gender parity and have employed creative solutions to muster support. In 2016, a large bloc of female MPs threatened to vote against the electoral law for the municipal elections if horizontal parity was not included. They also used the media to hold their male colleagues accountable for their public statements about supporting women in politics to force their hands.

Women in the 2019 parliament now say they face an uphill battle, due in part to their diminished voting power compared to previous years. The 2019 elections also saw a high turnover of incumbents, resulting in a loss of institutional knowledge and histories of cooperation and trust across parties, diminishing the chance that electoral law and the law concerning political parties will be successfully amended.



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The Carter Center recommends that parliament amend the electoral law to include both vertical and horizontal parity and the law on political parties to require internal parity in leadership structures.

Women's Participation in Governance

Standing in elections and being elected is not sufficient to guarantee women's full participation in the public affairs of the country. Rather, to comply with international and regional standards, women must be fully integrated in the public affairs of the state.⁴³ States must take necessary measures to ensure women's participation in policymaking—not as tokens, but as equals with their male contemporaries. Without the substantive contributions of women, policies fail to be both comprehensive and effective.⁴⁴

In in-depth interviews, elected women officials described that some of the barriers to inclusion they face as aspirants and candidates do not vanish once in office. Women remain underrepresented in leadership roles in parliament, in the government composition, and the ISIE. Further, the decision-making processes marginalize women.

Underrepresentation in Decision-Making: In parliament, women serve as presidents of 29% of committees—a slightly higher rate than their share of seats—but hold only 17% of vice presidencies. Forty-seven percent of committees have men acting as both president and vice president. There is only one committee led solely by women. The Committee of Industry, Energy, Natural Resources and the Environment is led by Abir Moussi, the leader of the PLD. The Committee on Women has a male president.

Women were also underrepresented in the Fakhfakh government, following the 2019 elections. Women were appointed to head four of 30 ministries—only 13%. Historically, women have been funneled into so-called soft ministries such as the Ministry of Women, Children, and Seniors or the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, which lack funding and power. However, in addition to the historically women-led ministries, Fakhfakh appointed the first female minister of justice in the country's history.

The ISIE was established in 2012, and its nine members are elected by parliament. The law establishing the ISIE in 2012 included a gender parity clause, requiring equal candidature between men and women. The gender parity provision was subsequently removed in 2013. In 2018, the parliament passed a law governing the structure of the five independent commissions established in the constitution.

This law establishes common provisions for the independent commissions, including a requirement of gender parity in their composition and between their presidents and vice presidents. However, since the law establishing the ISIE has not been amended since the passage of the law governing the independent commissions, the ISIE is not legally required to implement provisions on gender parity. Currently, the ISIE has only one female member. Even though she was a candidate for vice president, she was not elected by the other members. She became the official spokesperson of the ISIE in February 2019, but the position was eliminated seven months later without explanation. Although this was not in violation of the law, critics point to the hypocrisy of the ISIE's role in enforcing gender parity in elections while choosing not to respect it internally.

⁴³ U.N., CEDAW General Recommendation 23, (b), Article 7, para. 27; A.U., ACHPR-PW, 13(1); U.N., ICCPR, Articles 3 and 25(b).

⁴⁴ U.N., General Recommendation 23 (b), para 27; A.U., ACHPR-PW, Articles 9-1(c), 2 and 9(c).



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Marginalization: Female MPs in parliament and civil society observers of parliamentary politics reported that women are also marginalized in informal decision-making processes by their male colleagues. Decisions or positions taken in committee meetings are then reversed or changed by male members meeting together “in the hallways, in cafés, in bars.” One operative said that it is common to see men—but rarely women—from the same political party or parliamentary bloc deep in discussion walking around the parliament building engaging in “hallway lobbying.”

Civil society observers also noted that women are allocated less speaking time by their political bloc than their male counterparts during parliamentary hearings. During a plenary session, the presidents of parliamentary blocs (none of whom are women) distribute the bloc's allotted speaking time among its members and commonly favor male MPs. When women do speak, they are sometimes greeted with derision and hostility.

“When they speak, others don't like it. You can see the reactions on other MPs' faces—they're grimacing or mocking them. They don't need to scream or shout at them to silence them.”

Civil society activist

Women continue to face barriers to full participation in governance of the country as they remain underrepresented in leadership roles in parliament, in government composition, in decision-making roles in parliament, and in independent institutions, including the ISIE. The Carter Center recommends that parliament implement gender parity between presidents and vice presidents of parliamentary committees and develop leadership structures and opportunities for women within institutions through enforcement of the gender parity requirement in the 2018 law governing the structure of the five independent commissions established in the constitution.



Recommendations

TO THE ISIE

1. Build a more robust gender-mainstreaming program for unregistered women by developing regionally and subregionally responsive plans in consultation with regional coordinators of the ISIE and Tunisian and other CSOs to target unregistered women.
2. Expand focus on door-to-door registration, particularly in rural areas, in order to reach women who do not work outside the home and women who do not take their national ID cards with them on a daily basis.
3. Coordinate with Ministry of Interior and CSOs to build a comprehensive strategy to provide national ID cards for women.
4. Strengthen capacity of the ISIE to monitor and address campaign violations, particularly electoral violence against women.
5. Reassess placement and density of polling places, particularly in rural regions, to make it easier for women to vote.
6. Voluntarily choose to implement the gender parity provision between the president and vice president of the ISIE laid out in the law governing the structure of the independent constitutional bodies until an amendment to the law establishing the ISIE is passed in parliament.
7. Integrate gender into all data collection by the ISIE.

TO PARLIAMENT

1. Amend the electoral law to include horizontal parity in electoral lists. Enforce horizontal parity through invalidation of lists.
2. Amend the law on the organization of political parties by conditioning a portion of public funding of parties to increase the number of women in internal governing structures and the inclusion of more women as candidates.
3. Amend the law establishing the ISIE to align it with the law governing the independent constitutional authorities to oblige it to respect the principle of gender parity and to respect gender parity between the president and vice president.
4. Amend the Rules of Procedure to allow for an official women's caucus as well as other thematic blocs.
5. Amend the Rules of Procedure to require greater women's representation in leadership positions within committees and between the president and vice president of each committee.



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6. Hold regular constituency meetings, including sessions only for women, in varied parts of the district to actively solicit women's opinions on pending legislation and policy initiatives.
7. Institutionalize relationships between women in parliament, government, and municipal councils to create a pipeline of female political actors.

TO THE GOVERNMENT

1. Conduct a review of the implementation of the Law Eliminating Violence Against Women and recommendations on how to fully implement it by providing necessary material, human, educational, and enforcement resources.

TO POLITICAL PARTIES AND CANDIDATES

1. Form and maintain women's commissions at local, regional, and national levels of the party that function both during and between elections.
2. Actively recruit women into party structures at all levels and focus on appealing to young women.
3. Conduct an internal audit of the nomination procedures of a party to identify (un)intended gendered barriers, publish results, and make commitments to rectify for 2024 elections.
4. Invest in recruiting of female candidates early to help prepare them for elections before the pre-electoral period. Invest in capacity building and trainings.
5. Focus voter education in campaign materials on female candidates and the aspects of their personal biography that make them qualified.
6. Embed female candidates within party structures during campaigns to show voters that the candidates have the full support of the party.

TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

1. Use innovative and direct outreach approaches to women who live outside urban centers to join CSOs. Use door-to-door approaches.
2. Collaborate with the ISIE to increase voter and civic education to rural women well in advance of the next series of elections.

TO THE MEDIA

1. Publicly commit to maintain parity between male and female candidates and representatives during the campaign season and beyond for guests who appear in the media. Provide training to radio and TV staff on gender sensitivity in the media.



Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

2. Collaborate with state authorities and CSOs to develop and broadcast innovative education and awareness campaigns targeting women around registration and voting, and also violence against women and women's political participation.

**Appendices****ANNEX A: Focus Group Implementation****I. Focus Group Schedule**

Region	City	Date	Target groups
North-west	Le Kef	1/4/2020	Unregistered, >35
			Registered, 18-35, mixed voters/nonvoters
		1/5/2020	Unregistered, 18-35
			Registered, >35, mixed voters/nonvoters
Greater Tunis	Tunis	1/6/2020	Registered, 18-35, mixed voters/nonvoters
			Unregistered, >35
		1/7/2020	Unregistered, 18-35
			Registered, >35, mixed voters/nonvoters
Center-east	Sousse	1/8/2020	Registered, 18-35, mixed voters/nonvoters
			Unregistered, >35
		1/9/2020	Unregistered, 18-35
			Registered, >35, mixed voters/nonvoters
South-west	Gafsa	1/18/2020	Registered, 18-35, mixed voters/nonvoters
			Unregistered, >35
		1/19/2020	Registered, >35, mixed voters/nonvoters
			Unregistered, 18-35
South-east	Medenine	1/20/2020	Registered, 18-35, mixed voters/nonvoters
		1/21/2020	Unregistered, >35
			Unregistered, 18-35
		1/22/2020	Registered, >35, mixed voters/nonvoters



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II. Focus Group Statistical data

Total Focus Groups

City	Nb. of FG	Women (18-35)	Women (>35)	Total participants
Le Kef	4	24	22	46
Tunis	4	22	22	44
Sousse	4	23	22	45
Gafsa	4	22	20	42
Medenine	4	22	22	44
Total	20	113	108	221

Unregistered Women

City	Nb. of FG	Women (18-35)	Women (>35)	Total participants
Le Kef	2	12	12	24
Tunis	2	12	12	24
Sousse	2	13	12	25
Gafsa	2	12	10	22
Medenine	2	12	12	24
Total	10	61	58	119



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Registered Women

City	Nb. of FG	Women (18-35)	Women (>35)	Total participants
Le Kef	2	12	10	22
Tunis	2	10	10	20
Sousse	2	10	10	20
Gafsa	2	10	10	20
Medenine	2	10	10	20
Total	10	52	50	102



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III. Map of Focus Group Locations





Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

ANNEX B: Moderation Guide (Sample Questions)

IMPORTANT ISSUES & RELATIONSHIP TO ELITES

1. What are the most important issues to you? In your community? In Tunisia? To women?
 - a. Do politicians talk about these issues?
 - b. Do politicians or parties care about these issues too?
2. What needs to happen for these issues to improve?
3. Who do you trust to help improve these issues?
4. Which elections are more important in general: presidential or legislative? Why? In 2019?
5. What are your expectations of parliament? Government? President?

REGISTRATION (UNREGISTERED)

1. Why aren't you registered?
2. Is registering important? Why or why not?
3. How would you register to vote if you wanted to? If you don't know, how would you find out how?
4. Raise your hand if you have a national identification card.
 - a. Where do you keep it? If you don't have one, how come? How would you get a new one?
5. Do you know anyone who registered to vote and/or voted?
 - a. Did you discuss registering and/or voting with them? What did you discuss?
6. What would convince you to register? To vote?
7. Do you wish you had been able to vote in the 2019 elections? Why or why not?

REGISTRATION (REGISTERED)

1. Why did you decide to register? When and how did you register?
2. Did you have any problems registering? What were they?
 - a. What was the hardest/most complicated part about registering?
 - b. How could registering be easier?
3. How did you find out how to register and what dates registration was open? How did you know where to go and what to bring with you?

CAMPAIGN

1. How did you primarily find out about the candidates?
 - a. What interactions did you have with parties/coalitions/candidates?
2. What questions did you ask candidates or campaigners who came to your house? How satisfying were their answers? In what way?
 - a. What do you wish you had asked?
3. What can a candidate do to persuade you to vote for them?

PERSPECTIVES ON FEMALE CANDIDATES

1. How do you feel about women running for parliament or for president?
2. How are male and female candidates treated in the media? The same? Different? If different, how?
3. Have you ever witnessed anyone intimidating or harassing female candidates in public or on social media?
4. What are some of the difficulties you think female candidates face? What are some things that are harder for female candidates than male candidates and vice versa? Easier?



Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

5. How can Tunisia increase women's political participation?
6. Do you trust male or female candidates more to represent you in parliament or do you trust them the same? Why or why not?

VOTING (REGISTERED)

1. Raise your hand if you voted in the legislative or presidential elections in 2019:
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. Is it important to vote?
2. How did you find out how and where to vote?
3. Was there anything that made it hard or confusing to vote?
 - a. Did you have any questions while you were voting? What were they?
4. What is the hardest part of voting? What is the easiest? How could voting be easier?
5. How did you make your choice? What persuaded you?
6. Have you ever witnessed/ heard of incidents of intimidation, threats, violence and/or harassment against women to limit their political participation? Did these episodes influence your political involvement?



Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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