



# TUNISIAN WOMEN: Sustaining the Fight for Equal Rights



## TUNISIA: A Political and Economic Snapshot



Despite decades of political repression following its independence from France in 1956, Tunisia for many years saw economic prosperity—albeit unevenly distributed—accompanied by the region's most far-reaching constitutional and legislative measures regarding women's rights.

By the 1990s, the country had effectively transformed itself from a small agrarian economy, chiefly reliant on limited supplies of oil and natural gas, to an economy with a rapidly diversifying manufacturing base. In 2011, Tunisia had the highest annual per capita income in North Africa at around \$3,720, a level comparable to emerging economies such as China and Thailand.

Despite the lack of political rights for Tunisians, the country led the Arab world in promoting the legal and social status of women. Even before finalizing its Constitution in 1959, Tunisia in 1956 created a legal Personal Status Code (PSC), which acknowledged the rights of women in the family. The code prohibited polygamy, made divorce available to both spouses and granted women the right to manage their own assets. Legislative reforms in the 1990s further advanced the status of women. Tunisian labor law guarantees the right of women to work. In 1993, a new article was added to the labor code that proscribed discrimination between men and women. The government also required parents to send girls to school. Today, more than 50 percent of university students are women, and 66 percent of judges and lawyers are women.

Yet since independence from France, Tunisian citizens have enjoyed little democratic freedom. Two rulers governed the country until 2011, further concentrating political power in the nation's already highly centralized system. Between 2004 and 2008, 500,000 unemployed workers a year searched for jobs, and the country had an annual employment gap of 20,000 jobs—those it needed to accommodate new entrants into the labor market, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO). Unemployment was worst for college graduates, rising from 14 percent in 2005 to nearly 22 percent in 2009. Tunisia's economy, significantly exposed to European markets, was further buffeted in the global recession. In December 2010, high unemployment and lack of democratic freedom propelled Tunisians to the streets in a weeks-long uprising that launched what has come to be known in the West as the "Arab Spring."



# WOMEN ON THE FRONTLINES OF CHANGE

**On Dec. 17, 2010, a 23-year-old market vendor self-immolated to protest deep-seated government corruption that made it impossible for him to earn a living. Mohamed Bouazizi died from his injuries. Bouazizi's action touched a nerve in Tunisian society, sparking protests that spread quickly across the country, with the immediate support of the Tunisian Labor Federation (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT*). Tunisian trade unionists played a central role in the revolution, taking to the streets, helping organize security for their neighborhoods and demanding an end to violence against protesters.**

**The public outcry led to the ouster of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled Tunisia for 23 years and who, with his family, held sway over a large percentage of the Tunisian economy, controlling key market segments, including real estate, hotels, airlines, telecommunications and automobiles. Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011. Tunisians—women and men—had set the stage for uprisings across the Maghreb.**

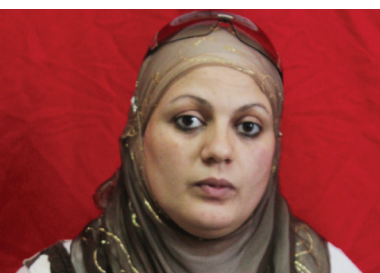
Newspaper reports from the time were filled with anecdotes about women taking to the streets to demand justice and that the men support their calls. "As far as the revolution is concerned, we can say that just one hour after the death of Mohamed Bouazizi, the opening salvo was shot by a woman who shouted in front of the municipality: 'Where are you men?'" says Souha Miladi, a school teacher and trade union member. "Immediately afterward, protests broke in the streets, and popular anger swept all the regions and reached the capital, prompting the fall of the dictator."

Women were empowered, they say, because they had for years participated in social mobilization activities by their unions. Activities "to demand improved working conditions and to defend core labor rights of decent work have been characterized by a massive presence of women," says Saida Garrach, an attorney and member of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women. "This momentum led to important participation of women in the Tunisian revolution."

Sihem Bousetta agrees: "During the revolution and until January 14, women were very effective in organizing strikes, sit-ins, marches, protests and were instrumental in the success of all demonstrations," says Sihem Bousetta. Like Miladi, Bousetta is a member of the UGTT, the nation's largest confederation of unions, which represents 10 percent to 15 percent of the country's workers. The UGTT has a long history with the independence movement of Tunisia and is playing a central role in the country's current transition.

Tunisian women, despite longstanding legal and social protections, only comprised 25 percent of the working population in 2010. And they were, and are, disproportionately represented among the most impoverished. Yet, working in large part through their unions, they formed strong networks and gained crucial leadership skills that helped them recognize their economic and political stake in democratic change. They are equipped to take steps to play a major role in the process—and unwilling to cede ground.

"Before the revolution, women believed in their role and in their struggle," says Aida Sbai, assistant general secretary in the local union, Golden Tulip El Mechtel Hotel-Tunis.



From left: **Aida Al-Zawee**, UGTT board member; **Najwa Makhoul**, National Committee of Women Workers/UGTT; **Souha Miladi**, school teacher and UGTT member; **Lilia Neji**, Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment.

Photos: Hedja Mahklouf



Miladi agrees: “The revolution represents a hope for democracy. However, we cannot talk about democracy if we miss the sense of citizenship. Half of the society does not enjoy the feeling of citizenship. We cannot talk about a national popular democratic change without giving the cause of women the required attention.”

After the uprising, a newly elected government took office in October 2011. Although social dialogue was ineffective in Tunisia during its successive authoritarian regimes, the new and rare coalition between secular and religious groups offered the prospect for democratic reform—and for women to play a role in the process.

“The struggle of Tunisian women did not just begin today. It is rooted in their history, since independence, and in their struggle against colonialism, tyranny,” says Siham Maadi, a high school teacher and UGTT activist. “Many women martyrs have fallen. We have fought against tyranny...in unions and in the legal system and in all civil arenas.”

In the mid-1980s, conservatives attempted to erode Tunisia’s secular approach to women’s rights by seeking to repeal the PSC. At the same time, the UGTT formed a women’s committee to highlight issues of women workers and, across society, other women’s associations formed to raise concerns of working women. Women activists created a magazine, *Nissa*, also focused on women’s issues, including unpaid work. Its first issue set the tone, announcing that women’s rights were at risk. Later, organizations like the Tunisian Democratic Women Association (*Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates*, ATFD) and Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (*Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement*, AFTURD) formed to defend women’s rights, reinforce legislation ensuring those rights and support women to overcome legal, social and other obstacles, according to journalist Zakiya Laaridh. Past activism and success were the foundation upon which women stood as they took their place when Tunisia turned away from autocracy.

Over time, the UGTT has served as a key resource for women workers. The federation provides small loans to women to improve their economic status and financial independence, especially when they are their family’s only breadwinners, says Lilia Neji, an official in the Ministry of Vocational Training and a UGTT activist. Neji also notes that the UGTT carries out “awareness campaigns to encourage women to work at nonprofit organizations” and sponsors “education and training workshops to improve their job skills, increase

their civic education and boost their participation in the union.” The UGTT’s National Committee of Women’s Workers provided a haven within a male-dominated organization where women networked, offered mutual support and honed valuable leadership skills.

Although women make up 48 percent of UGTT’s members, women say their hopes for greater participation in their union after the uprising have only been partially realized. “After a revolution for freedom, dignity and equality, women found themselves excluded from union leadership,” says Najoua Makhoul, a coordinator of the UGTT’s National Committee of Women Workers. “If women want to be in the leadership, they have to advocate a quota system within the basic trade unions structures and senior key positions. The same holds true for society in general and in government as well.”

Women have fared a little better within the political sphere than within the union movement, but they still have far to go, they say. As the nation prepared for its first free elections on October 23, 2011, the Tunisian high commission responsible for planning elections ruled that parties’ lists of candidates for the constituent assembly were required to be 50 percent female. Yet only the candidates at the top of each party’s lists stood a good chance of winning seats, and only about 5% of lists were headed by women. In the end, after the 2011 elections, women held roughly the same percentage of seats in the National Constituent Assembly as they did under Ben Ali.

Further, says Neji, “only a few women MP’s take the floor and the majority of them refrain from any comments during Parliament’s sessions. We only have two women ministers, one of them is the Minister of Women’s Affairs and the second is the Minister of Environment. Two women in cabinet positions out of 50 cabinet members, in a post-revolution Tunisia. How shameful!”

## Raising Their Voices

In a politically repressive country, Tunisian women needed a space from which they could influence civil society. In providing the resources and a supportive environment, the UGTT—as representative of the broader labor movement—has been key for women seeking to more fully develop their leadership skills, strengthen their financial security and broaden their political awareness.

And in the months following the October 2011 elections, Tunisian women have repeatedly demonstrated they are well prepared to vigilantly defend their rights and the post-revolution flame of democracy.



When Tunisia's newly elected constituent assembly sought to make Islamic law the basis of the new constitution, "women expressed their anger and struggled for their rights," says Makhoul. "Thanks to women's activism, the constituent assembly maintained the first article of the constitution, which provides for Tunisia to be a civil state, with Islam as its religion, and Arabic as its language, based on a republican system."

An even bigger challenge emerged in August 2012, when the constituent assembly proposed an article that described a woman as not equal to a man but rather a "complement with the man in the family and an associate to the man in the development of the country." Tunisian women were set that month to celebrate National Women's Day on August 13. Instead, "we changed the celebrations into protests and organized a rally, a rally that included at least 20,000 to 30,000 people," says Makhoul.

## REACHING WOMEN IN THE 'SECOND TUNISIA'



Unions must reach out to women in rural areas to ensure they access their economic and democratic rights, says labor activist **Aida Sibai**.

Photo: Hedja Makhoul

In Tunisia, where the most recent data show that four times as many people living in poverty reside in rural, not urban, areas, rural women are especially vulnerable. In 2011, 27 percent of rural girls were illiterate, compared with 7 percent of rural boys. Urban Tunisian women work as magistrates, dentists and pharmacologists and in many other high-level occupations, and have access to employment initiatives and programs that are rare at the regional level. With little formal education and scarce financial resources, rural Tunisian women have few opportunities to improve their economic and social circumstances and often work in the informal economy.

"In this country, women who live in the second Tunisia" do not have the same economic and legal rights, says Lilia Labidi, a Tunisian anthropologist and visiting research professor at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute. Labidi, who served as the Minister of Women's Affairs in Tunisia during the early stages of the nation's democratic transition, describes her goals for the nation as going beyond a "strategy of survival" to formal employment for rural women.

Trade unionist Aida Sibai is among labor activists who recognize the need to reach out beyond the city centers. "Women who live in the remote regions are marginalized, and it is our duty to talk to them. It is our belief that their participation is necessary."

Sibai's organization, Tunisia's Tourism Partnership Association, is new. It helps raise the income of families struggling financially and helps them get to know Tunisia through tourism. She says union activists must reach out to rural women and women in the country's interior to discuss their opportunities and participation in the country's future.

The mother of three school-age children, Sibai says women "pushed men to go out and do things... So how can we not remember (women) or claim that their role is limited just to being stay-at-home moms? It is our desire to promote women, especially those living in the internal regions."

"The [UGTT] was one of the actors in the rally on August 13," human rights activist Samiyah Noorah said at the time of the proposed constitutional article. "They called on a lot of women, and even men, not only women. This issue affects everyone."

Prior to the uprising, the UGTT had conducted economic education work, reaching out to college students, particularly low-income students. These students later joined in the constitutional debates that followed. College students facilitated discussions around the proposed "complementary" article, and women's presence in the discussions highlighted their key role, says human rights author Buthayna Bsais.

Noorah said the awareness campaigns were national. "It is not an issue that can wait or be put on the back burner. You can feel this sense of urgency when it comes to this issue." Maadi and other women actively urged the constituent assembly to drop the article and not turn back the clock 50 years. Aida Al Sibai, a member of the Tunisia Tourism Partnership Association, described their message this way: "No! We refuse to have our rights violated!"

As the protests waged on, Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki, a member of the ruling Ennahada Party, expressed his support for a new constitution that reaffirms male-female equality as enshrined in a 1956 law. In November 2012, Tunisia's constituent assembly dropped the proposed article. The assembly also removed an article that described the nation as committed to ensuring gender equality "as long as it does not conflict with the rulings of Islamic Sharia." But, as of February 2013, it was not clear whether the final draft of the new constitution will retain provisions from the nation's 1956 constitution affirming women's equality.

Some women are more optimistic than others about the future of civil society in the new Tunisia. But however they view the future, they are determined to play a big role in shaping it. Women in the nation's capital, Tunis, are reaching out to women in impoverished rural communities, providing food and health services while engaging them in education about their rights as citizens. The UGTT National Committee of Women Workers is partnering with other allied groups to create a new organization to combat violence against women, which has dramatically increased in the wake of the uprising. Says Aida Al-Zawee, a UGTT board member, "Through supporting the legislation of the union, supporting women's committees, through conducting many meetings—meetings through which we can cooperate to a great extent with other women's organizations—this is the solution."

Maadi is among those who have "complete confidence that our people who achieved the revolution will not allow passage of legislation or constitutional articles that will take this society backward." She and other Tunisian women also know that complete equality between men and women "will be the criteria used to judge whether the constitution is democratic and progressive. It will also be the criteria by which we will judge whether the revolution succeeded or failed."

## **GOING FORWARD: Tunisian Women Push Their Unions**

In a politically repressed society with few options for participation in civic life, the union movement, through local unions and the UGTT, offered a structured and safe environment for women to develop skills and tap into resources. Women say broadening union participation and effectiveness is critical to continued expansion of women's role in civil society, in a new, more open Tunisia. Women say they will work to see their unions:

**Expand outreach and education into rural areas.** Accounting for 33 percent of Tunisia's population, rural areas represent a large, untapped source of human potential, especially women and girls, whose isolation and lack of education have hindered them from becoming full participants in civil society.

**Monitor implementation of laws enshrining women's rights.** "We need to find mechanisms to ensure the implementation of these laws," says union activist, Souha Miladi.

**Give leadership positions to women.** "Ninety percent of textile workers are women" and yet men serve in most union leadership roles, says Aida Zaria, deputy secretary-general of the Regional Federation of Textile Workers of Tunisia. "We will try to make female representation inside trade unions more important."

**Urge government and employers to promote and hire women.** "There are some sectors where women constitute more than 70 percent of the workers, such as public health and education," says trade unionist Lilia Neji. "And despite this fact, we do not see women in decision-making positions."

## 5 THINGS THAT WORKED

**1. Organizational support.** The UGTT, Tunisian Association of Democratic Women and other groups offered a supportive space for women to connect, develop skills and pool resources. In a nation with few outlets for engaging in civil society, the UGTT “played the role of a haven, a mentor and a catalyst to the revolution. It ensured the success of the democratic transition in our country,” says Bousetta, who also is a member of the UGTT’s National Committee of Women Workers.

**2. Education of girls and women.** More than 50 percent of Tunisian university students were women in 2005, and urban women’s access to education has provided the stepping stone to jobs, participation in organizations and unions, and a broader awareness of their human rights.

**3. Workplace participation.** Achieving personal autonomy outside the household and encountering opportunities to learn about and express their rights on the job have been essential to empowering Tunisian women to fight for their causes and take on greater political expression. “Because we believed in our chances, in our democracy, in our citizenship, we waged a fight and continue to do so,” says Sibai.

**4. Persistence in the face of repression.** Women activists were sometimes “sidelined and ignored, says trade union activist Aida Sibai. “Despite all these problems, these women continued their resistance and demanded their rights to dignity and to equal citizenship.”

**5. Empowerment through social mobilization.** Through their unions, the women were called upon and valued as they supported issues and causes. When their rights were threatened, the women formed organizations—of workers, of academics, of likeminded individuals who they could rally for a cause.



Photo: UGTT



## ABOUT THIS SERIES

Working people, regardless of country, want a government that is transparent, representative and accountable to its citizens—and which acts to better all citizens' economic circumstances. Around the world, labor unions and worker organizations play an important role in advocating for fundamental human rights, ensuring the voices and aspirations of workers are part of the national dialogue, and advancing policies that better serve civil society and promote equitable economic growth and humane development. *Catalysts for Change*, an ongoing series produced by the Solidarity Center with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy, features the working people, their unions and activists who are advancing worker rights and greater equity in their societies, often under trying circumstances. Their experience and efforts provide real, transferable lessons for others seeking to effect positive change.



## MISSION STATEMENT

The Solidarity Center's mission is to help build a global labor movement by strengthening the economic and political power of workers around the world through effective, independent and democratic unions.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

### Union Generale Tunisienne des Travailleurs (UGTT)

<http://www.ugtt.org.tn/fr/>  
29 Place Mohammad Ali  
Tunis 1002, TUNISIA  
Fax: (+216) 71 259 621

### Association Tunisienne des Femmes Democrates (ATFD)

<http://femmesdemocrates.org>  
112, Avenue de la Liberté  
Tunis 1002, TUNISIA  
Email: [femmes\\_feministes@yahoo.fr](mailto:femmes_feministes@yahoo.fr)  
Phone: (+216) 71 890 011  
Fax: (+216) 71 890 032  
Mobile: (+216) 22 953 782

## RESOURCES

The primary sources for this publication were first-person interviews conducted by the Solidarity Center. Notes on other sources can be found on the Solidarity Center web site, [www.solidaritycenter.org](http://www.solidaritycenter.org)



Photo: HALEY/SIPA/1101191931 (Sipa via AP Images)