



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

Small Grantee Feature: Female Voices from Egypt, Mauritania and Tunisia

Should women fear a reversal of social, political and economic rights under Islamist governments, or will they find new opportunities in all three sectors?

Emna ben Arab (Assistant Professor, [University of Sfax](#)) and Laryssa Chomiak (Director, Centre d'Etudes Maghrébines á Tunis - [CEMAT](#)) participated in a Hollings Center Regional Policy Dialogue entitled, [Economies of the Arab Spring](#) (October 2011). They were interested in carrying the discussion a step further by examining how conservative parties on the rise in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco are dealing with women's integration into socio-economic life. Thus was born the *Female Voices* conference concept.



Audience of the Female Voices Conference

Debating the Politics, Economics and Gender of Islamism: Female Voices from Ennahda, Freedom and Justice Party and Attawassoul took place in Tunis on April 12, 2012. The conference brought together women members of parliament and party officers from Egypt, Mauritania and Tunisia. Sanem Güner was in Tunis to attend the conference and interviewed the organizers and speakers on how they see the matter of women within Islamist politics.

Interview with *Female Voices* speakers



Laryssa Chomiak, CEMAT and Yaye Coulibaly,
Attawassoul Party

Güner: Could you tell us how you developed the idea of the conference?

Laryssa Chomiak: Dr. Ben Arab and I met at a Hollings Center dialogue in Istanbul last October, just a few days after the Tunisian elections of October 23, 2011, and we had our first conversation about the conference then. We debated the meaning of the Tunisian elections in the context of so many changes in

the region. Having this dialogue in Turkey, we of course discussed the question of the Turkish model, a debate that resonated in public space in Tunisia, especially regarding the question of women in politics. We also spoke of the role of gender in the new political contexts across the region. Will the role of women change in post-revolutionary Tunisia and across the region? What are the economic advantages and challenges for women? What about social changes and new opportunities? Here at the *Female Voices* conference in Tunis, we are fortunate to have a dynamic group of women from Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania discuss these very questions.

Güner: Ahead of the conference you conducted a survey to identify crucial issues relating to the rise of Islamist political parties. What were some of the results?



Emna ben Arab, University of Sfax

Emna ben Arab: We asked questions about how respondents see the situation of women in political, economic, social and cultural areas and what their future expectations are. We saw that there is a high rate of uncertainty in social issues. People are undecided about how mentalities will be affected and how this will reflect on women's social position under an Islamist government. Respondents believe that women will ask for more economic participation compared to the pre-Arab Spring period.

A majority of the respondents said that women's seemingly high participation in public life under the former regime was a façade so that Ben Ali could cover up his otherwise bad performance. We held the survey among 1800 postgraduate students in three universities – Tunis, Sfax and Manouba – in February 2012. Average respondent age was 26, and we got a high 92 percent response rate.

Güner: Ms. Labidi, how does your party – Ennahda – see the role of women?

Mahrizia Labidi (Vice Chair, National Founding Assembly, Tunisia): Ben Ali's dictatorship succeeded in marketing the image of a liberated Tunisian woman. However the question we should ask is, what do women want in reality? For us, women's public role in Tunisian, Arab and African societies are interlinked. Women should not be passive consumers; they should go back to their Islamic points of reference to find the encouragement to be active. If a woman is in politics, she has to prove she can be able to swim with the big fish.



Mahrizia Labidi, Vice Chair of the Tunisian National Founding Assembly, making a press statement after the conference.

Güner: Ms. Mohamad and Ms. Salama, as women in political life, how would you describe your own journeys?



Nermeen Mohamad (Researcher, Freedom and Justice Party, Egypt): I always felt that Arabs are very defensive and I did not like that rhetoric of powerlessness and exceptionalism. I decided that I can beat this and become a powerful person, and that for me meant becoming a member of Congress. I don't think I even knew what that entailed, but I started living my life with this aim. I was politicized in high school and adopted an Islamic form of existence. I never saw myself less than a man. I always thought that I could be or do anything I aspired to.

Noha Salama (Officer, Freedom and Justice Party, Egypt): At the conference, even before introducing myself, I began my presentation by describing the day that I walked to Tahrir because it made me who I am today. I

walked for four hours alongside a woman carrying her baby on her back. I thought, "How can she be thinking of anything else but to feed her baby?" The whole world was expecting that people would revolt out of poverty in Egypt. But Tahrir proved to be beyond that. People were asking for their freedom as much as for their economic rights. When you start asking for your freedom, you become a politician.

Güner: What checks and balances are your parties proposing in their programs so that people don't fear a reversal of their rights?

Rafiaa ben Mohamed (Officer, Ennahda, Tunisia): The democratic constitution that we are now working on will be the guarantee for everybody's rights. At Ennahda, we believe in *citizenship* rights - that is, equal rights for men and women - and we don't like separating the one from the other. As for people's fears, all I can say is that it is not possible that we'll bring dictatorship back.



Noha Salama, Freedom and Justice Party and Rafiaa ben Mohamed, Ennahda

Nermeen Mohamad: I want everyone to feel safe that what happened before will never happen again. We have to guarantee freedom of choice for everyone. I also don't see the issue as men against women. Women and men are equal in dignity and responsibility but they are not identical. In any balanced society men and women must have clearly defined roles, but our party does not prescribe strict roles to anyone or try to limit anyone. Approximately 50 percent of Muslim Brotherhood members are women.

Reflections on the *Female Voices* conference



The *Female Voices* conference was a good opportunity to discuss how women's demands fare within the broader context of post-Arab Spring politics. The conference was also an occasion for a debate across supporters of Islamist parties and secularists (or 'modernists' in Tunisia). Both sides have strong preconceptions about each other but have not engaged in political dialogue, mainly because the Islamist camp was not allowed to be in politics before the Arab revolutions. At the conference, the secularist group was very skeptical of the abundant references to Islam in the discussion. One member of the audience noted that women's rights (or human rights for that matter) could not be tied to any religion and ideology and that

there needed to be universal norms. Others in the audience asked questions about much-debated issues in Islam such as inheritance rights, polygamy, divorce and adoption—they were curious to hear what conservative women had to say about these matters. The responses from the party representatives were always very diplomatic, avoiding a stand-off. Some in the audience saw this as sidestepping difficult issues or as evidence of a hidden agenda. Others interpreted this as pragmatism, a sign that conservative women in politics have developed an interpretation of Islam that is more in line with the zeitgeist and less ideological.

Ultimately it is too soon to tell whether conservative governments will expand or erode women's social, political and economic rights. Consider the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey, one of the inspirations for this conference. For some, AKP has proved itself a unifying party that is both the voice of devout Muslims but that also speaks for liberal and democratic values. Yet others are concerned that AKP—like many other parties—has fallen short in developing policies for women's political and economic participation. In times of political transition, there are ultimately no easy answers to dilemmas of political representation. But the *Female Voices* conference indicates that debates in the years ahead in Tunisia, Egypt and Mauritania will be at once more difficult and more democratic.