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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL LIFE OF ARAB-MUSLIM COUNTRIES: EXAMPLES FROM TUNISIA AND LEBANON

Abstract

The article emphasizes the importance of women's participation in the socio-political life of a country. While most European countries have already made some progress in the fight for gender equality, for most countries in different parts of the world, including in the Arab-Muslim world, gender equality remains unrealized. Nevertheless, the understanding of the need for women's participation in public and political life is becoming increasingly clear. Equal representation of women in local governments, legislative and representative bodies is directly related to the economic and socio-political sustainable development of countries. The authors use the examples of Tunisia and Lebanon, which on one hand belong to the countries of the Arab world, and on the other hand, adhere to secular principles of government at the legislative level to analyze the historical development of 'women's' issues in countries where religion and politics are intertwined. The authors consider in detail that in these two countries traditions are still strong and religion is a powerful social and political factor, which influences the current state of gender equality and act as obstacles for women's participation in politics at different levels of government. Special attention in this article is paid to the implementation of the Tunisian model of gender equality, which has shown positive results and can serve as a model for many countries of the Arab-Muslim world.

Keywords: Tunis, Lebanon, gender equality, Islam, Christianity, "state feminism"

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Introduction

The number of women in the world represents half of the world's population and gender equality has become an integral part of human rights. When gender equality is achieved, the progressive development of human society, ensuring peace and harmonious development of the individual is possible. In 1979, the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW), often referred to as the international bill of women's rights. The Convention's 30 articles clearly define the concept of discrimination against women and propose an agenda for action at the national level to end such discrimination. The Convention further considers culture and tradition as influential forces that shape gender roles and family relationships.

Gender inequality persists in the economic and political spheres. Despite some progress in recent decades, on average, women in the global labour market still earn 24 per cent less than men. As of August 2018, only 24% of the total number of parliamentarians were women. In 1995, this figure was 11.3 percent³, which indicates that there has been no significant progress on this issue. Today, there is no doubt that women's participation in society ensures sustainable economic growth and the development of social institutions. An example of this is the progressive development of most European countries, where women participate on an equal basis with men in the socio-political and economic life of their countries. In many countries, equal participation of women and men in politics, the economy and other spheres of activity is enshrined in legislation. The experience of European countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and Finland, which today are the most "feminized" in terms of women's presence in national governments and parliaments, and where their integration into the world of politics has taken place, shows that where women are widely represented in power structures, there are real results in addressing issues related to education, child rearing, career development of working women, maternal and child health, prevention of domestic violence, and so on. For example, thanks to various types of quotas in the Nordic countries over the past 30 years, the improvement in the status of women has been so significant that the whole face of politics has changed.

There is no denying the fact that "the growth of the feminist movement and the urgent need to integrate democratic ideals into scientific theory have drawn attention to the importance of raising issues related to women's rights, defending their interests and their participation in public and political life"⁴.

3 United Nations. Gender equality: the unfinished business of our time. Available at: <https://www.un.org/ru/sections/issues-depth/gender-equality/>, (accessed 30.07.2020)

4 Original text in Russian: рост феминистского движения и настоятельная необходимость интегрировать демократические идеалы в научную теорию привлекли внимание к важности постановки вопросов, касающихся прав женщин, отстаивания их интересов и участия их в общественной и политической жизни. See: Gyl'nara I. Gadzhimuradova, Gender and political culture, *Representative power-XXI century: legislation, comments, problems*, No. 7-8, 2013, pp. 52-54. [in Russian]

Because the divided public and private spheres have become the main territories of men and women in a patriarchal society, one of the main problems in feminist theory has become the problem of interaction between them. Historically, the power of a man over a woman came from the economic dependence of a woman on a man. One of the manifestations of this is the monopolization by men of key positions in political and power structures. Therefore, any statement of the question of "male" and "female" often has a socio-political subtext. Today, it is necessary to understand that building democratic institutions in a society is inextricably linked to how this society treats the problem of gender relations, which is understood as the equality of rights and opportunities for both men and women. The integration of women into political life consists of two parts: (a) the role that women play in politics and (b) the role that politics play in the lives of women themselves.

The political activism of women around the world has raised questions about their real impact on political decision-making processes. The globalized world is very permeable; countries are becoming more open and closer to each other. The Arab-Muslim world is also at the epicenter of world processes, including the process of "feminization" of various aspects of social and political life. Muslim women are actively involved in integrating themselves into the political life of their countries. A striking example of this is Tunisia, where women have achieved a greater level of integration into their country's social and political life than in other Arab-Muslim countries. The country is home to about 12 million people, 95 percent of whom profess Sunni Islam. In their research, the authors attempt to provide information on how the government's religion and its relationship to Islamist movements at various stages of the country's development played a role in shaping public policy regarding women and their rights, as well as on the role of women in society and politics. Moreover, the situation after the "Jasmine revolution" in terms of the participation of women in the country's political life and in solving the problems facing them is analysed.

In this study, the authors also consider the political system of Lebanon and the participation of women in the country's public and political life. Religion plays a huge role in all spheres of society in this country, and even the political structure of the country is based on confessionalism, which assumes the organization of state power in accordance with the division of society into religious communities. Both Christianity and Islam in Lebanon are represented in the form of many different faiths. Lebanon and Tunisia are countries with a traditional patriarchal culture and a majority Muslim population. Moreover, both countries have long been under the protectorate of France, having taken over some elements of the French political system from it after independence. While the Tunisian constitution states that the country's official religion is Islam, the secular nature of the state

Гаджимурадова Г.И. Гендер и политическая культура, *Представительная власть - XXI век: законодательство, комментарии, проблемы*. 2013. № 7-8 (126-127). С. 52-54.

in Tunisia is enshrined in legislation and the state's openness to more 'liberal' interpretations of Islam. Lebanon is considered one of the most liberal and secular states of the Arab world. But while it does not identify an official state religion in its Constitution, legislation on many issues regarding women and their rights are handed over to religious courts. Consequently, achieving gender equality is hindered due to the fact that women's rights are entangled in questions about religion and its role in society and politics in these two countries.

In Tunisia, where Islam was gently "liberalized" for political purposes by presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali, women are more widely represented in government and have more rights at the legislative level. Lebanon, torn by sectarian contradictions and several wars and military conflicts, including a 15-year civil war, has been engrossed in power struggles and largely ignored the issue of women's rights and their equality. Therefore, for all the liberalism of this country, the 'women's' agenda has not taken place and the representation of women in politics is often demonstrative. Here politics and religion are quite firmly intertwined, which, of course, limits women's participation in political decision-making since religion often leaves only the private sphere for women to implement their activities. Thus, we can say that Tunisia is a good example of democratic changes in the Arab-Muslim world, especially with regard to women's rights. In Tunisia, women have rights that women in some countries of the "developed West" cannot even claim. This is an example of how you can adhere to democratic norms in the political life of a country and still remain in the bosom of your religion. Lebanon is also an example of a secular state in the Arab-Muslim world, which, despite all the difficulties of political life in a multi-religious society, tries to stay within the framework of democratic transformations. But here, unlike in Tunisia, religion plays a large role in the country's domestic political life, which does not allow for rapid democratic changes in relation to the "feminization" of politics. This is primarily due to the fact that gender stereotypes that exist in many societies prevent women from entering politics. Women in many countries have political rights, but they are still not fully integrated into the world of politics, and they will not be until they are equally represented in all political structures. Moreover, the examples of Tunisia and Lebanon shows that in the Arab-Muslim world, the integration of women into the political life of their countries is possible and expected. This can have very positive consequences for the sustainable economic growth, social and political development of the Arab-Muslim countries and their integration into the world political system.

Women's political representation in Tunisia: From 'state feminism' to pluralistic politics

The history of Tunisia after gaining independence from French colonial rule can be divided into three periods. The first period (1956 -1987), which began

under President Habib Bourguiba, was marked by a policy of 'top-down' "state feminism"; that is, decision-making on 'women's issues' at the state level. In the second period (1987-2011), when Ben Ali came to power as a result of a 'white coup', the policy of state feminism continued, but witnessed the growth of the feminist movement from within, that is, from the 'bottom up'. The third period (post January 14, 2011) was marked by the "Jasmine revolution" and the overthrow of Ben Ali. This period is characterized by an increased public discussion of women's rights, which are rooted in ideological conflicts between the modernizing state and a conservative Islamist opposition.

For a better understanding of the history of the issue in Tunisia, we will elaborate on some historical facts. Tunisia gained independence from French colonialism in 1956. Its first President, Habib Bourguiba, sought to modernize society and resist tribalism and Islamism by building a secular, progressive state. For this purpose, large investments were made in social welfare and education programs, including women's education, resulting in a large segment of educated women among the modern population. In the first few years of his reign, Bourguiba took a number of actions that were aimed at limiting the role of religion in society and politics⁵. Islamists opposed the secularization of the state, seeing it the influence of the former metropolis. The country's left-wing parties, including the Tunisian Communist party, the Democratic Socialist movement and the Future Unity party, also opposed Bourguiba's rule, which led to the strengthening of the role of the Pro-presidential Socialist Destourian Party (PSD). Thus, Bourguiba faced opposition from left-wing parties and Islamist groups, as his rule was "not only oppressive, but also, a repressive one as far as civil liberties and individual rights were concerned"⁶. It is important to note that some left-wing and student groups did not object to his plans of modernizing the country, but they tried to challenge his hegemonic and repressive form of government.

Nevertheless, one of the symbols of Bourguiba's modernist policies was 'state feminism', in which he sought to 'liberalize feminist forces'. In his own words, "no effort should be spared at last to reverse the strong historical forces that for centuries reduced women to the condition either of a despicable being or of a priceless object"⁷. In the late 1950's, women in Tunisia gained several rights, including the right to vote and stand for election, to move open, bank accounts and work and start a business without the permission of their spouses⁸. In 1956, Bourguiba introduced the Code du Statut Personnel (CSP), Tunisia's civil law,

5 For example, he abolished religious courts and destroyed the Zaytouna mosque, which was one of the main centers of Islamic learning in the Maghreb region. In addition, he opposed the wearing of the hijab and fasting in the month of Ramadan.

6 Derradji Abder-rahmane, Tunisia: From Bourguiba's Era to The Jasmine Revolution & Fall of Ben Ali, *Adam Akademi Sosyol Bilimler Dergisi*, Vol. 1, No. 2., 2011, pp. 47-54.

7 Habib Bourguiba, L'émancipation de la femme conditionne le progrès social, 14 August 1972, *Ministère des Affaires Culturelles et de l'Information*, Tunis, September 1972.

8 In addition, in the 1960s, the family planning program became widespread, and in 1973, women were given the right to make their own decisions on termination of pregnancy.

which was primarily concerned with personal status. The CSP was considered a “code of positive law, formally separate from Islamic law”⁹, in which polygamy was abolished and a divorce trial was introduced, which secured equal rights for both spouses in divorce. Thus, during the reign of Bourguiba, women gained more rights both at the political and social level. However, under his rule, there was also a process of curtailing feminist movements, as only the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT) was allowed to operate. According to Charrad, “the CPS was part and parcel of a larger state building program that aimed at developing a modern centralized state and at marginalizing tribal or kin-based communities in local areas”¹⁰. All this pointed to the fact that ‘Bourguiba’s feminism’ was not created completely for the purpose of promoting the empowerment of women, but rather was part of a wider strategy to combat Islamism, break down tribal alliances and turn Tunisians’ loyalty to the state.

While Tunisia is considered a secular country, Islam has historically played a fundamental role in society and, consequently, in politics. In fact, the importance of religion to Tunisia’s identity was reflected in its 1959 Constitution, which in the preamble states that the representatives of the Tunisian people shall “remain faithful to the teachings of Islam”¹¹, and in the first article that “Tunisia is a free, independent and sovereign state. Its religion is Islam, its language is Arabic and its type of government is the Republic”¹². From the time of the Islamic caliphs (790-950) until the 13th century, otherwise distinguished as the ‘Golden age’ of Islam, Tunisia was known as a center of Islamic learning. It was in Tunisia that *Maliki fiqh* (one of the four main schools of thought and interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence in Sunni Islam) was founded. This “heritage and memory of the ‘golden age’ of Islam and the Maliki fiqh plays a central role in the nation’s conception of itself and demonstrates how Islam is a basis of Tunisia’s state identity”¹³. As such, although Bourguiba sought to create a modern, secular state, he could not ignore or try to erase the strong Islamic roots of the North African nation¹⁴. In addition, Bourguiba believed, at least publicly, that liberalizing laws

9 Augustin Jomier, *Secularism and State Feminism: Tunisia’s Smoke and Mirrors*, books and ideas, 2011. (Translated by John Zvesper). Available at: <https://booksandideas.net/Secularism-and-State-Feminism.html>, (accessed 15.07.2020).

10 Mona M. Charrad, Tunisia at the Forefront of the Arab World: Two Waves of Gender Legislation. *Washington and Lee Law Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 2007, pp. 1513-1527.

11 Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia, 1959. Available at: <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/tn/tn028en.pdf>, (accessed 10.07.2020)

12 Ibidem.

13 Mari Norbakk, “The women’s rights champion: Tunisia’s potential for furthering women’s rights”, *Chr. Michelsen Institute*, Report No. 6, 2016, p. 22.

14 For reference: the French tried to marginalize traditional practices such as wearing the hijab. In the struggle for independence, Bourguiba adopted a nationalistic religious approach and as a means of strengthening cultural solidarity against the colonial occupier, he even encouraged women to wear the traditional headscarf, sefseri, which is drawn over their hair and entire body. Even in the post-independence period, when his rhetoric shifted sharply to modernist, anti-Islamic. Nevertheless, he understood that religious feelings were an important part of addressing the national discourse. For example, the CPR States that the husband is the sole head of the family. In addition, as far as inheritance is concerned, most of the Muslim jurisprudence is still disputed in Tunisia, and men and women remain unequal

would only strengthen women's virtue and not lead to negative consequences for them in the public sphere. Thus, "although Tunisia is often considered a secular country, Islamic sources have been central to the construction of family law there"¹⁵. The CSP and women's representation and participation in the political process in the country was, in fact, a victory for the government in securing a reformist interpretation of Islam. Bourguiba's vision of modernity was actually a rejection of dogmatism and an encouragement of Islamic innovations which emphasize that Islam can and should be adapted to the modern world. Up to 1969, the modernist course dominated Bourguiba's politics. However, the commitment to women's liberation soon waned and was replaced by a more traditional and religious view of the family. This was evident by allowing some judges "Islamist" interpretations of the CSP, despite "absence of Islam as a source of the CSP law or of its interpretation"¹⁶. This was accompanied with the state changing its discourse about women, became more dependent on religious traditions and interpretations and even encouraging the creation of religious organizations. While the fast of Ramadan was considered retrograde and harmful to the economy, it became encouraged, with government organizations changing their working hours in accordance with the hours of fasting. This "eclipse of secularization policies in the 1970s can be explained by the fact that Bourguiba, eager to counter opposition from the left, sought an alliance with religious political parties and groups"¹⁷ and was thus forced to change his discourse on women's rights in order to preserve the alliance.

After the coup in November 1987, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali attempted a policy of reconciliation with the Islamist parties in an effort to neutralise them. He sought to appear more 'Arab-Muslim' and pardoned several activists who were jailed during Bourguiba's rule. Two years later, however, this policy took a repressive turn in which the government sought to suppress the Islamist opposition. This is when Ben Ali turned to the legacy of Bourguiba and picked up the discourse and policy of "state feminism", which was accompanied by women's activism in a bottom-up process. During this period, 'independent' organisations formed and were allowed to operate more freely. However, feminism was still considered an issue controlled and sponsored by the state. As such, women's movements, for the most part, worked alongside the Ben Ali government rather than in opposition to it. To ensure that all these 'independent' organisations supported and not challenged the government, they had to be approved by the Ministry of Culture¹⁸. Nevertheless, these organisations achieved some victories, as in the 1990s several reforms were introduced granting women the

15 Mari Norbakk, "The women's rights champion: Tunisia's potential for furthering women's rights"... p. 8.

16 Augustin Jomier, *Secularism and State Feminism: Tunisia's Smoke and Mirrors...*

17 *Ibidem*.

18 Moreover, only women's organisations with secular orientations were allowed to operate under Ben Ali's rule, as that was in line with his political objective to promote modernism in opposition to Islamism.

right to receive alimony in case of instigating divorce, as well as giving women custody of their children after the husband's death. Moreover, Ben Ali created the Secretariat of State for Women and Family in 1992, which later became the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Family and Children, and the Elderly (MAFFEPA), whose responsibilities were to "co-ordinate and develop government policy for women's promotion"¹⁹. In 1993, a citizenship reform allowing women to pass on their nationality to their children born outside of Tunisia, regardless of the father's nationality was introduced and considered a major step for women towards being considered equal citizens in the nation-state. According to Charrad (2007), "in introducing matrilineal descent as a legitimate and sufficient reason for *jus sanguinis* regardless of *jus soli*, the provision of 1993 challenges the special status of patrilineality as the source of membership in the political community"²⁰. Furthermore, Ben Ali allowed reforms to the labour law, which guaranteed women equal pay in the labour market. The increase in the number of women's associations made their presence in the political space more visible²¹. This consequently equipped women with the tools needed to develop a feminist movement, which began emerging in late 1970s and increasingly towards the 1990s.

Like Bourguiba, Ben Ali tried to integrate feminist politics into his agenda, fueled in part by a desire to limit the spread of Islamist movements and integrate ideas of modernity and secularism into national identity. The "state feminism" of Bourguiba and Ben Ali was a tool in the arsenal of policies aimed at curbing Islamist rhetoric and meeting modern demands²². As such, the feminist movement, its rhetoric and activities were controlled by the state and not allowed to operate freely. Despite that, the feminist movement achieved several gains, which serve as bases for the current and future fight for women's rights. Graph 1 below shows the percentage of Tunisian women elected to the Assembly of the Representatives of the People of Tunisia from 1959 until 2009. These numbers demonstrate a continuous increase in women's representation in the Assembly. The increase starting in 1986 corresponds with Ben Ali's increased support of feminist policies as part of his strategy to counter 'Islamism'. This indicates that the state's empowerment of women gives them a chance to make their voices heard 'from the bottom up' and get more representation in the legislative bodies of their country. Here it is important to note the importance of Ben Ali and Bour-

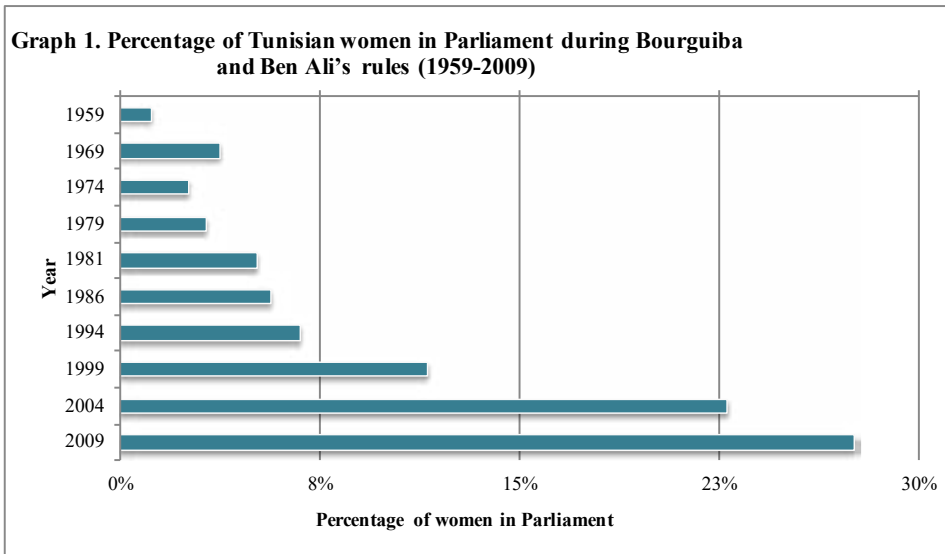
19 Victoria Chambers, Clare Cummings Clare, *Building Momentum: Women's Empowerment in Tunisia*, Case study report, Overseas Development Institute, 2014, p. 25. Available at: http://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/tunisia_case_study_-_full_report_final_web.pdf, (accessed 10.07.2020).

20 Mona M. Charrad, Tunisia at the Forefront of the Arab World: Two Waves of Gender Legislation. *Washington and Lee Law Review*. Vol. 64, No. 4. 2007, pp. 1513-1527.

21 Bougruiba's education policy facilitated this process, as it resulted in an educated portion of Tunisia's female population.

22 However, they believed that it is necessary to control and limit feminist rhetoric so as not to seem dependent on Western traditions. Therefore, reforms were implemented that could be adopted within the framework of more "liberal" interpretations of Islam, but do not deviate from Islam.

guiba's "feminist policy" as one of their strategies to counter the growing Islamist opposition, on the one hand, and to consolidate power, on the other. Despite their support of the patriarchal nature of society on several levels and the limitations they put on the feminist movements, this strategy allowed for more liberal interpretations of Islam with respect to women's role first in the family, and then consequently in society and politics. This created the prerequisites for the third period of women's emancipation and their participation in the political sphere.



Source: Inter Parliamentary Union. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/content/tunisia?chamber_id=13546,

The third period started with the beginning of the "Jasmine revolution" driven by people's discontent with corruption, economic difficulties and police brutality. The protests resulted in the resignation of Ben Ali in January 2011, in the aftermath of which "Tunisia moved towards a more liberal political system and for the first time, in October 2011, the country elected representatives to the National Constituent Assembly (NCA)"²³, the body charged with drafting the new Tunisian constitution. While women's issues were not one of the driving forces behind the revolution, women actively participated in the revolution and, after the ouster of Ben Ali, debates on women's rights became central during the NCA elections and new Constitution drafting process. This is not very surprising, as instrumentalizing women's issues for political purposes has been a distinctive feature of modern Tunisian power politics. According to Marks, "for competing political parties ... women's rights represented a useful wedge issue—one that could deflect attention from hastily constructed economic programs

23 Victoria Chambers, Clare Cummings, *Building Momentum: Women's Empowerment in Tunisia*. . . p. 9.

and isolate electoral opponents as either 'too secular' or 'too Islamist' to please the population at large"²⁴. Being used by political parties as an instrument for gaining political preferences resulted in some significant gains for women, who's representation in political structures and grassroots activism increased in this period. For example, "women's organisations drafted and supported a measure that led to a quota on gender parity on party electoral lists being passed into law for the October 2011 elections called by the transitional government"²⁵. In May 2011, the gender parity law was passed which stipulated that 50% of a political party's candidate list must be comprised of women and that the so called "zipper system" must be used, in which candidates on the list alternate between men and women. This led to 49 women being elected to the NCA. Moreover, women gained access to several decision-making bodies and high positions of the NCA. For example, to the position of First Vice-President of the Assembly, Meherziya Laâbidi was appointed and out of the seven members of the bureau supporting the President of the Assembly, three were women. Moreover, women were present in the six constituent committees charged with drafting the constitution. One of these committees, namely the sensitive rights and freedoms committee charged with addressing women's rights issues, was headed by Ferida Labidi, a representative of Al-Nahda party.

The overthrow of Ben Ali and the transition to a more liberal political system gave the Al-Nahda party the opportunity to participate in the NCA elections without being subjected to repression. This led to fears of religion's influence on society increasing and threatening the liberal legislation on women's rights adopted since the 1950's under Bourguiba and later Ben Ali's rules. The secularists positioned themselves as the defenders of women's rights during the elections and feared that a win for the Islamist Al-Nahda party could lead to some of women's historically gained rights being reversed and lost. However, while some of the newly formed parties were not entirely supportive of the gender parity law due to concerns of finding enough women to fill the list, the Al-Nahda party did not face such an issue due to its broad support base. In the 2011 elections, Al-Nahda party won 41% of seats in the Assembly (89 out of the 217 seats). The Islamist party's win fuelled fears of 'bearded patriarchy'²⁶, a term used by Marks, by many local and international secularists. However, of all the 49 women elected to the NCA, 42 were representatives of the Al-Nahda party. The Islamist party has many female followers who believe that women should play a more active role in public life and, at the same time, support religious, more traditional interpretations of woman's rights. Their secular counterparts, however, advocated for more modernist interpretations of the role of women in both the private and public spheres.

24 Monica Marks, "Women's rights before and after the revolution", in: *The making of the Tunisian revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, Nouri Gana (ed), Edinburgh University Press, 2013, p. 1.

25 Victoria Chambers, Clare Cummings Clare, *Building Momentum: Women's Empowerment in Tunisia*. . . p. 39.

26 Monica Marks, "Women's rights before and after the revolution" . . . p. 2.

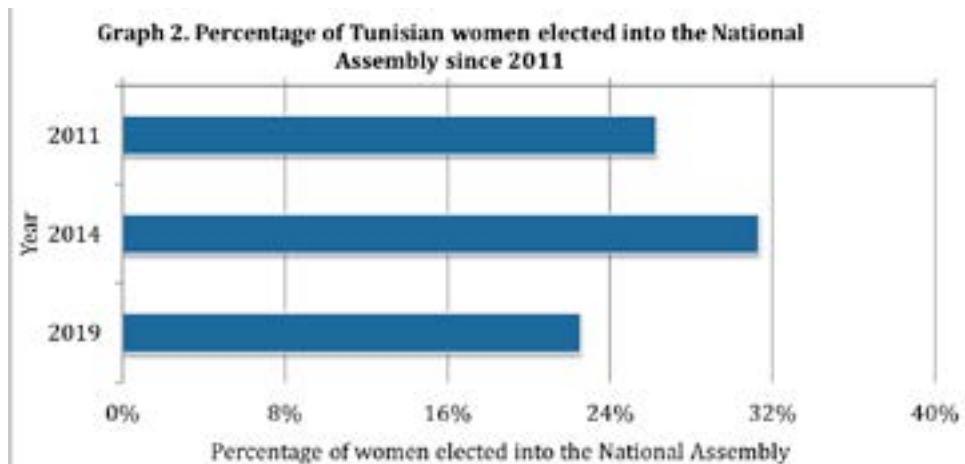
We can state that the political process in Tunisia is becoming more and more pluralistic, and women's voices and opinions are being heard. If before the revolution the Islamist movement was repressed and only modernist women's organizations could operate, then after the revolution Tunisian politics became more inclusive, which led to a plurality of women's voices. Various women's movements followed different ideological schools, ranging from Islamist feminists to modernist feminists. During this period, the debate on women's rights was intertwined with the question of traditional religious identity versus the secular identity of the state. In this respect, the post-revolutionary period is similar to the first two periods discussed, during which women's rights were used for political gain. However, one of the main differences is the increased representation of women in political structures. This, supported by the law on gender parity, as well as the growth of women's activism at the grass-roots level and within civil society structures, allowed them to participate more decisively in the new Constitution drafting process. According to Chambers and Cummings, women's presence in the NCA "as well as a vibrant civil society strongly influenced the drafting of the new Constitution, which in its final version preserved and even advanced women's key social and political gains"²⁷. One of the most hotly debated issues in the new draft Constitution was article 28, which originally stipulated that the role of women in the family is complementary, and not equal, to that of men. Women's organisations, such as the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH) and the Tunisian Woman's Association for Research and Development (AFTURD), organised online petitions and demonstrations to protest against the used terminology. Moreover, on National Women's Day (August 13), approximately 7000 people, including Sihem Bedi, Minister of Women's Affairs and Souad Abderrahim, a Member of Parliament from Al-Nahda party marched in Tunis calling for the revision of Article 28. Some representatives of Al-Nahda, such as Ferida Labidi and Monia Brahim, argued that "the article was mistranslated and taken deliberately out of context by the party's detractors"²⁸, and that Article 22 of the draft enshrines equality of all citizens. Due to pressure from local women's rights groups and local and international organizations, it was decided to drop the complementarity clause and replace it with a much clearer article stating that men and women are equal in rights and responsibilities. This indicates that, instead of adhering to ideological positions, the Al-Nahda party has adopted a somewhat flexible and pragmatic approach in its accommodation of public opinion.

Despite the fact that in the post-revolutionary period, women's issues in Tunisia were rooted in the ideological question of the state's religious identity, they continued to make some progress, thanks to a freer, more active and determined movement of civil society, and to more women being in decision-making positions. Graph 2 shows the percentage of women elected to the

27 Victoria Chambers, Clare Cummings Clare, *Building Momentum: Women's Empowerment in Tunisia*... p. 42.

28 Marks Monica, "Women's rights before and after the revolution"... p. 11.

National Assembly after the “Jasmine revolution”. The graph presents a gradual but not consistent increase in the percentage of women elected in the last three elections, which means that while women in Tunisia have managed to become more present in political institutions, the fight is not over yet and there are still several obstacles to their reaching gender parity. For example, while women constituted 50% of all candidates, only approximately 27% of those elected to the NCA in 2011 were women. This is partially due to the fact that most political parties nominated men, rather than women, as heads of party lists. Moreover, in research conducted by the the National Democratic Institute (NDI), which conducted interviews with male and female Members of Parliament, many female members stated that there still exist barriers to their advancement in parliament. These barriers, they stated, “flow from systemic historical discrimination against women in Tunisian society and thereby in political parties and in parliament”²⁹, and include women’s lack of political experience and family approval, a “boys club” mentality in decision-making structures and discrimination in political parties. Some of the concrete issues remaining regarding women’s rights include inequality in inheritance. The NDI conducted a series of focus groups exploring public opinion on women’s participation in public and political life. The research found that the existing inheritance law is widely supported throughout the country, noting that “when discussing heritage ... most participants, across gender and different age groups, favored a literal interpretation of the *sharia*”³⁰.



Source: Inter Parliamentary Union. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/content/tunisia?chamber_id=13546

29 Gender Assessment of Tunisia’s National Constituent Assembly, *National Democratic Institute*, 2014, p. 9.

30 Borovsky Gabriella, Ben Yahia Asma, Women’s political participation in Tunisia after the revolution: findings from groups in Tunisia conducted February 17-28, 2012, *National Democratic Institute*, 2012. p. 19.

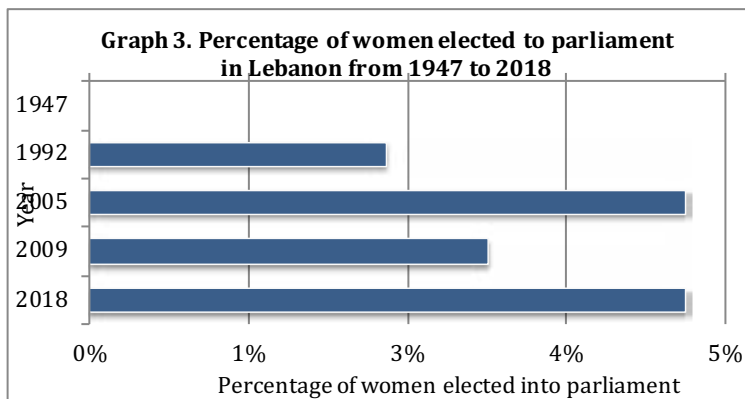
Politics in Lebanon: it's a man's world

Geographically, Lebanon is part of the Levant region which encompasses today's Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the State of Palestine and the state of Israel. After the Sykes Picot agreement was reached by the French and the British colonialists in 1916, the region was divided into 'independent' countries. As such, Lebanon (previously known as Mount Lebanon) became a sovereign entity. This small Mediterranean country is home to various religious groups which have been engaged in conflict over resources and political representation since the 19th century, when Mount Lebanon was under Ottoman rule. These tensions continued during the French colonial rule, after Lebanon became an independent country, and still do to this day. In an effort to ensure equal access and political representation for all groups within the country, the religious divisions were institutionalized into Lebanon's political system. This resulted in the infamous consociational democracy model of Lebanon, which divides political power proportionally between the country's 18 officially identified confessional groups, and reserves the position of the President of the Republic for a representative from the Maronite Christian group, the Speaker of the Parliament is a representative of the Shi'ite domination of Muslims and for the Sunni group is reserved the position of the Prime Minister. The 128 parliament seats are proportionally divided between the 18 officially identified confessional groups.

The Lebanese model of democracy has been hailed by many politicians and political scientists as an ideal system for ethnically divided countries that should be followed by other countries in the region suffering from inter confessional differences, such as Syria and Iraq. The "Arab spring" wave bypassed Lebanon and the country avoided regression into a new civil war despite the unrest in neighboring countries with which it shares borders. It is believed that the power-sharing model has been successful in maintaining a certain level of stability in an otherwise turmoil region. However, Lebanon's political process is characterised by susceptibility to foreign intervention, periods of political vacuum and infighting, leading to a fragmented society and a weak government. Elections have not been held regularly in Lebanon due to internal unrest and political deadlock. From 1975 to 1990, Lebanon was entrenched in a civil war during which no elections were held. Moreover, while parliamentary elections were supposed to take place in 2013, due to reasons related to unrest in the region and inability of the parliament to elect a new president, they were postponed three times. As such, instability, mainly fueled by the inability of the country's various religious groups to coexist peacefully and govern together, has led to an unstable political process.

Lebanon is also considered a model of modernity in the region, with its capital Beirut often referred to as the 'Paris of the Middle East' due to the fusion

of modernity and traditionalism, Eastern and Western elements in its cultural and political discourse. However, looking at women's position in society and in political and decision-making institutions paints a different picture; one in which women are largely marginalised from the process of distributing political power, and therefore, decision-making. In 1953, Lebanese women for the first time in history voted and earned the right to run for elections. However, as can be seen in graph 3, women's representation in parliament over the years has been marginal at best, and still a long way from the 50% requirement to achieve gender equality.



Source: Inter Parliamentary Union. Available at: https://data.ipu.org/content/lebanon?chamber_id=13446

This is a result of patriarchal nature of Lebanese politics and the instability of the Lebanese political process, both augmented and sustained by the consociational power-sharing system which has accommodated foreign intervention and exacerbated internal differences. Dalia Mitri explains that the evolution of women's movements in Lebanon underwent four waves. The first wave was linked to the struggle for independence. In this wave, the 'feminist' discourse was interlinked to a nationalist one; seeking independence from foreign rule. After independence, there was a rise in leftist movements influenced by Marxist ideas, which influenced the women's movements at that time. Then came the 15-year civil war in which all mobilisation of women's movements came to a halt as relief was the main field of work of NGOs and other organizations. The post-civil war period (post 1990) saw a new wave which occurred simultaneously with the intensified appearance of women's movements on the international level (the Beijing conference, adoption of CEDAW and multiplication of NGOs). This wave coincided with the end of the Cold war and increased funding for NGOs, in line with the new neoliberal world order. As such, Islamists and leftists viewed the work of these NGOs critically and considered them a vehicle for the spread of Western neoliberal ideas and destroying Arab values and social structures. The

final wave was born within the anti-globalization movement framework and saw a radical model of leftist feminist organizations³¹, who's aim is addressing issues of gender social roles and the struggle against patriarchy. One common aspect between all the waves is the absence of a government's role or policy aimed directly at furthering women's rights. In fact, NGOs and women's organization work closely with the state and with political parties to implement projects aimed at helping women in an effort to compensate for the Lebanese state's weakness in this area. While that work is necessary and important to push for legislation and monitor the state's application of new adopted or amended laws, it has had negative implications on possibilities of mobilising large groups of women to join a women's movement.

The Lebanese Constitution, promulgated in 1926 and amended in 1990 ensures equality between all its citizens, as stated in article 7 of chapter 2, "all Lebanese shall be equal before the law. They shall equally enjoy civil and political rights and shall equally be bound by public obligations and duties without any distinction"³². Moreover, Lebanon ratified the CEDAW Convention in 1996. However, the state placed reservations on several of the convention's articles, including 9(2) and 16(1) which regard the issues of gender equality in citizenship rights and family laws. According to Dima Dabbous (2017), "Lebanon's reservations to these articles reaffirmed the state's unwillingness to grant women equal rights under the law and its intent to uphold inherent discrimination against women in all areas related to family life"³³. Furthermore, "Article 9 of the Constitution contradicts the equality of Lebanese citizens it concedes in Article 7; since it delegates all personal status issues (including inheritance, divorce, marriage and custody) to different religious courts, depending on a citizen's sect"³⁴. Traditional interpretations of religion and the politicisation of the question of women's rights limit women's possibilities to effectively participate in the social and political spheres of their country. Furthermore, Lebanese women do not enjoy equal rights with men when it comes to various issue of personal status, such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody of children. This is in line with religious laws, which are the source of legislation of all personal status matters in Lebanon. As Salameh explains, "the current Lebanese constitution refers all personal status laws to doctrinal religious courts, where all matters related to the family ... are under the exclusive responsibility of religious institutions which promote ideas that put the man at the head of the family, and consequently

31 Daou B., "Les Féminismes au Liban: un dynamisme de positionnement par rapport au patriarcat et un renouvellement au sein du "Printemps Arabe"", Masters Thesis, Université Saint- Joseph, Beirut, 2014.

32 Constitution of Lebanon, 1926. Available at: <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/lexdocs/laws/en/lb/lb018en.pdf>, (accessed 15.07.2020).

33 Dima Dabbous, Legal Reform and Women's Rights in Lebanese Personal Status Laws, *CHR. Michelsen Institute*, Report No. 3, 2017, p. 8.

34 Hind Sharif, "The Origin of Women's Segregation in Lebanon's Political Life: Between Patriarchy and Consociational Democracy". Master's Thesis, Université Saint- Joseph, Beirut, 2016, p. 9.

maintain the inferior standing of women according to law³⁵. Each religious sect has its own personal status laws and courts to which all members of a confessional group are subjugated from the moment they are born, creating an environment of discrimination not only between men and women, but also amongst women of different sectarian groups. Women's personal rights and status are not guaranteed by the Constitution or civil law, but rather by religious institutions and various interpretations of the respective religions' teachings. Religious interpretations of a woman's role in the family have become social norms in which the man is the provider and the woman is the home career. Therefore, "all of the aspects of social and personal practices are centered around the concept of family unit, the dynamics of which are governed based on the interests of the ruling religious and political establishment, whereby the family is defined in law through the male lineage"³⁶. Consequently, the Lebanese state denies its citizens a wide range of rights which lie outside confessional structures. For example, citizen laws do not allow a mother to pass on her nationality to children whose father does not carry a Lebanese nationality.

In Lebanon, religion and politics have an interdependent relationship, where the heads of the sectarian communities are also the heads of political parties — who were themselves warlords during the country's civil war. These sectarian leaders are referred to as '*zou'ama*' (for plural or '*za'im*' for singular), meaning leader or chief. The Lebanese consociational power-sharing system puts power in the hands of the '*za'im*' "who is the spokesperson, deal-broker, and decision-maker on behalf of an entire sectarian community"³⁷. The *za'im* has, with no exceptions, always been a man, and is the one who carries the privilege of deciding on candidate selection. As such, the consociational power-sharing system of Lebanon allows for familialism and clientelism to manage the country's political process behind the scene. In research conducted by Carmen Geha (2019) on women's experiences with party structures and electoral campaigns, three main obstacles were identified, preventing women from actively and effectively participating in their country's political process. The first obstacle is the lack of access to male-dominated structures and spaces. This includes access to events and meetings that are usually held late at night, thereby excluding women from attendance due to concerns about physical safety when traveling home late after the meetings. In addition, women have fewer opportunities to establish public relations, because "not only are Lebanese men more exposed and connected to their communities they are also the ones with ties to foreign states that act

35 Riwa Salameh, "Gender politics in Lebanon and the limits of legal reformism", Civil Society Knowledge Center, Lebanon Support. 2015, p. 3.

36 Quoted from: Salameh Riwa, "Gender politics in Lebanon and the limits of legal reformism" . . . p. 3

37 Carmen Geha, The Myth of Women's Political Empowerment within Lebanon's Sectarian Power-Sharing System, *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 2019, pp. 498-521.

as patrons to their parties”³⁸. The second obstacle is related to the clientelist and patriarchal nature of the Lebanese society and elections, in which leadership positions are handed down from father to son or son-in-law, thus leaving no space for women to reach high positions based on their qualifications. The few women who do get a seat in the parliament are known as “women in black”, due to the fact that they are related to a previous deceased member of the parliament. According to the 2018 Freedom House Index report, “in the parliament elected in 2009, only four women held seats in the parliament, and they were all relatives of previous members, reflecting a tendency of prominent families to head the established sectarian parties”³⁹. The “women in black” usually hold the place of a deceased father or husband, while the rightful male heir is being prepared to take his seat. Politics is not considered a woman’s job, for women have more family and household duties compared to their male counterparts and are expected to be home in the evenings to take care of the family’s needs. This leads to the third obstacle based on Geha’s research, which is ‘the challenge of patriarchy’. Patriarchy in the Lebanese political process can be found on several levels. First of all, it refers to “legal and cultural practices that restrict women’s capacity to influence the institutions which shape national policies”⁴⁰. Patriarchy also refers to the fact that men are the religious leaders and the heads of confessional courts, therefore women’s demands and voices do not have a platform and are not taken into consideration, which makes the introduction of female-friendly policies a challenging task. As such, even if a woman receives support from her family to run for elections, she is unlikely to receive much support from constituencies who view politics as a man’s job, and taking care of the household, a woman’s. Moreover, the *zou’ama* of religious communities and political parties have a monopoly on candidate selection and therefore elections, in a process that excludes women and their issues. In fact, in the 2016 government Lebanon acquired a new 30-minister government featuring, for the first time, a ministry responsible for refugee affairs, combatting corruption and women’s affairs. Heading this ministry, however, was Jean Ogasapian – a man who had a lengthy career in the Lebanese army. As such, a man was given the position that was supposed to help address women’s problems and reflect their point of view. Geha argues that “the case of Lebanon reveals how sectarian power-sharing can create institutional set-ups that are inaccessible and unfeasible for women to be represented”⁴¹.

Furthermore, the country’s history of being under colonialism and the instability of the country’s internal political process has had serious

38 Ibidem.

39 Freedom in The World: Lebanon 2018 report. Freedom House Index, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/lebanon/freedom-world/2018>, (accessed 15.07.2020)

40 Carmen Geha, The Myth of Women’s Political Empowerment within Lebanon’s Sectarian Power-Sharing System. . .

41 Ibidem.

consequences on the development of a women's movement in Lebanon. Weak governance, which has consequently led to long moments of political vacuum, inadequate public services infrastructure and lately, an economic crisis, has been a hindrance in the path of the development of a women's movement. That is why, at the spearhead of fight for women's issues in Lebanon are non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which receive funding from international donors and rely on the expertise of hired professionals, rather than being led by a unified woman's movement. The difference between a social movement and an NGO is that NGOs target certain groups and implement specific projects, whereas a woman's movement is "expected to attract a large number of people, aiming for a common goal and trying to have a wide impact on social change"⁴². While the Lebanese government is tangled in inter-religious quarrels and a constant fight over power and resources, there has been practically no place or advocates within government structures to officially include women's rights in the agenda. Given the interconnection of religion and politics in Lebanon, advocating for a more active role for women in society and politics, and challenging religious laws, institutions and interpretations does not serve the interests of the religio-political leaders. All these obstacles, however, have not stopped women from attempting to run for elections and participate in their country's political life. In the 2018 parliamentary election, 111 women registered, out of which 86 ran as candidates for parliament. However, only 6 of them were elected while four women were given ministerial ranks, with Raya Hassan serving as the country's interior minister, the first woman to hold such a position in the Arab world⁴³.

The severe economic crisis in the country, which in October 2019 led to nationwide protests (some call it a revolution) and the resignation of Prime Minister Saeed al-Hariri, has led to women holding have never previously held women's positions in Lebanon or the Arab world. During the protests, thousands of citizens of different confessional faiths, genders and ages demanded an end to sectarian politics' monopoly over nominations and a move to a more technocratic government, where qualified ministers are appointed. The protestors wanted to see new, qualified faces in government rather than politically motivated nominations and appointees with loyalties to one or another confessional group. Women's issues, such as their right to pass citizenship to their children and equal pay were some of the prominent demands and slogans that filled the streets during the protests. Moreover, women were active participants and organisers, demanding to be part of the discussion and solution of their country's future. For over a month, Parliament members were unable to agree on nominations for the new Cabinet. Eventually, the Lebanese parliament successfully formed a new

42 Dalia Mitri Dalia, "From Public Space to Office Space: the professionalization/NGO-ization of the feminist movement associations in Lebanon and its impact on mobilization and achieving social change", *Civil Society Knowledge Center, Lebanon Support*, 2015, p. 3.

43 *Freedom in The World: Lebanon 2018 report*. . .

Cabinet of Ministers which, for the first time, included 6 women ministers in the 20-member Cabinet (30% of the Cabinet). While women were previously given so-called 'soft-ministries', such as that of youth and sports, the newly formed cabinet saw women heading what are considered heavier or more important ministries. For the first time in the Arab world, Zeina Akar, a Lebanese woman, holds the position of Minister of Defense and deputy to the Prime Minister. Other female ministers are heading the ministries of justice, labour, information, displacement and youth and sports.

While this can be considered a victory for women, the Lebanese public was suspicious that these nominations were just a move to placate them or please the international community by providing new faces as demanded by the protestors, but without intentions of implementing reforms that would benefit the people. The public did not have a high level of confidence in the newly appointed women from the beginning for they do not have confidence in the political process in general. As such, the circumstances under which these women were nominated were not very encouraging and do not give them a chance to prove themselves as qualified, capable candidates. Women were finally given representation in decision-making positions, however, it was at a time when the country seems to be trapped in a never-ending spiral of increasing prices, inflation and currency devaluation (the Lebanese pound has lost about 80% of its value over the past 10 months). According to CNBC news, "the country's unemployment rate stood above 30% at the end of May, while annual food inflation has skyrocketed to around 190%"⁴⁴. The country's economic situation, which so far appears to be unredeemable with no foreign countries or organizations willing to lend the indebted country any more money, has put women's issues on the backburner. When citizens are struggling to eat and afford basic necessities, issues such as women's rights cease to seem vital, despite equality between men and women being key for a society's sustainable development. However, as Carmen Geha (2020) argues, despite "the current Cabinet comprised of a historical 30% of women representation [being] a prime example of superficial nominal reforms that co-opt women's demands for substantial representation"⁴⁵, one should not be cynical and build on this unprecedented development for women in Lebanese politics.

44 Emma Graham, Already in financial meltdown, Lebanon endures blackouts of around 20 hours a day. CNBC. July 10, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cnb.com/2020/07/10/already-in-financial-meltdown-lebanon-endures-daily-blackouts.html>, (accessed 15.07.2020).

45 Carmen Geha, "Lebanese women and the politics of representation". Arab Reform Initiative, February 18 2020, available at: https://www.arab-reform.net/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Arab_Reform_Initiative_en_lebanese-women-and-the-politics-of-representation_9118.pdf?ver=6094daecd5ea5494c69111b8f4fca906, (accessed 20.08.2020).

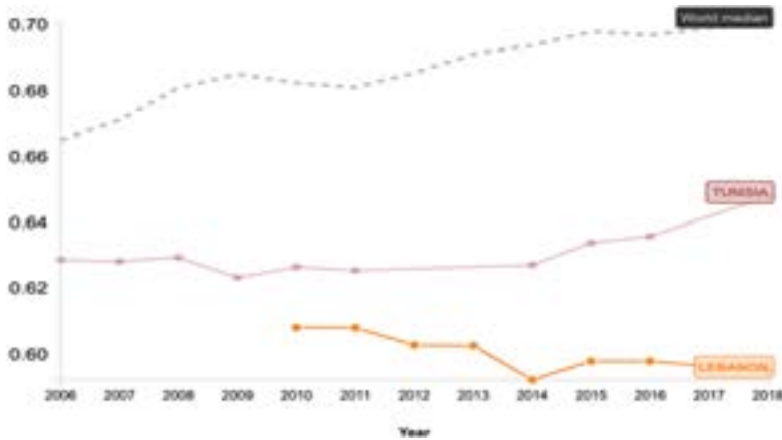
Comparative analysis and conclusion

Graph 4 below presents the overall gender gap index (GGI) rating for both Tunisia and Lebanon from 2006 to 2018, in comparison to the world median. The GGI measures gender-based gaps in access to health care, education, economic and political resources in over 150 countries. As can be seen in graph 4, Lebanon has a long way before reaching gender parity, indicating that within the country, the gender gap is high. Moreover, the country's rating in the index has been consistently decreasing since 2010, with a slight increase in 2014. Tunisia, on the other hand, while still lagging behind the world median, is among the best performing countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in terms of closing its gender gap. The slight but consistent increase in Tunisia's GGI rating since 2011 coincides with the Jasmine revolution, thus indicated that the revolution has led to some positive democratic reforms that consequently decreased the gender-based gaps in Tunisia. Out of the 18 MENA countries identified by the GGI⁴⁶ report published in 2020, Tunisia ranks 4th in the region and 124th globally (out of the 153 countries covered in the report). Lebanon, however, ranks 14th in the region and 145th globally. Since this article focuses on women's political representation, a closer look at the political empowerment category of Tunisia and Lebanon within the GGI is warranted. In the category of political empowerment, Tunisia ranks 67th globally and Lebanon, 149th. What explains this difference between women's ability to attain representation in political institutions in Tunisia and Lebanon? While there is undoubtedly a multitude of interconnected factors impacting female political empowerment and participation, this article focuses primarily on the respective political processes in the case study countries and, in particular, the interrelation and interaction between religion and politics.

The two countries share some similarities. Both were colonized by the French and gained independence in the mid-20th century but remain influenced by francophonic cultural and political elements despite their societies being characterised as patriarchal. However, after gaining independence the two countries followed very different paths in their state formation processes. As has already been presented, women in Tunisia enjoy more access to political representation than their counterparts in Lebanon, where clientelism and an unstable political process exclude women's rights from the political agenda. We argue in this paper that the difference lays in the two countries' different approaches to women's rights in relation to following religious jurisprudence and traditions and consolidating political power, and in the level of stability each country has witnessed since its creation.

46 Global Gender Gap Report 2020. World Economic Forum 2020. Available at: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf, (accessed 15.07.2020).

Graph 4. Overall Gender Gap Index in Lebanon and Tunisia in comparison to the world median from 2006 until 2018.



Source: The World Bank. Overall Gender Gap Index. [Electronic Resource]. Available at: https://tcdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/af52ebe9?country=LBN&indicator=27959&countries=TUN&viz=line_chart&years=2010,2018

Overall, Tunisia enjoyed relatively more stability since its creation than Lebanon did. This is due to the configuration of its population and consequently, the political system it adopted, as well as the level of stability in its neighboring countries. The north African nation, which has a majority Sunni-Muslim population, emerged from colonialism with a single ruler with a secular-oriented modernising agenda. Even though the country's secularist leaders supported the decrease of religion's role in society, they understood that Islam is a part of the Tunisian heritage and identity that cannot be ignored. The homogeneity of the Tunisian population's religion is an important factor which supported the creation of a more widely agreed upon national identity, and internal issues revolved primarily around the role that religion should play in political and social life. In contrast, Lebanon's population is a mosaic of different Muslim, Christian and other smaller confessional religious groups who have, since the 19th century at least, been quarrelling over power, resources and, after independence, the Lebanese states' identity and interactions with other countries. In an effort to ensure stability in the power was diffused and shared among religious groups, each headed by a *za'im*. However, instead of stability, consociational democracy in Lebanon created an unstable political system characterized by struggle over power by different religious groups that feel threatened by each other.

Moreover, while both countries are situated in the MENA region, they have witnessed different levels of political and military stability since they gained independence. Being situated in a politically and militarily turmoil region and sharing borders with the states of Israel and Syria, Lebanon has been greatly af-

ected by regional conflicts, which exacerbated its own internal struggles and further allowed for foreign intervention in the country's political process. The power dynamics and conflicts between the country's ruling parties and the influence of foreign conflicts and forces on them has resulted in an unstable political process, leaving women's rights no place on the agenda. On the other hand, while Tunisia did have periods of internal instability and political upheaval, it was not as severely affected as Lebanon was by regional events and by foreign interventions. This meant that in Tunisia, political dialogue and conflict mostly revolved around local issues that touch citizens' daily lives and ideological differences. This allowed for political activism to flourish in a more organized manner and for issues such as women's rights to find a place on the agenda.

One of the key factors to why women in Tunisia enjoy a higher level of political representation is primarily related to its history of being a center for Islamic learning and the existence of opposing ideologically charged groups struggling against each other for power. Tunisia was a center of Islamic 'ijtihad' (independent reasoning), which gave birth to the Maliki Fiqh. The practice of ijtihad set the ground for the adoption of more liberal interpretations of the Koran and Islamic laws regarding women's rights and role in society. The conflict in Tunisia regarding the role that religion and tradition should play in private and public life has been key in advancing women's rights in Tunisia. The issue of women's rights was politicised in all three periods discussed in this paper. Bourguiba established 'state feminism' as one way to battle Islamism with modernism on a hotly contested issue such as women's rights, while still maintaining control over the rhetoric used in promoting and fighting for equality between men and women. After overthrowing Bourguiba, Ben Ali maintained the facade of 'state feminism' and allowed women's movements a certain amount of what can be called controlled freedom. This was a strategic move on his part to consolidate power while repressing opposition movements and creating an image of modernity and liberalism. Being officially sanctioned by the government meant that women's organizations were able to organize, familiarise themselves with the political process and even gain access to some decision-making bodies. Given Tunisia's Islamic heritage, it was important to find a balance between modernising and still respecting the country's proud religious history. That is why the CSP maintained some contested inequalities between man and women, such as inequality in inheritance, based on interpretations of religious texts that are accepted by a wide portion of society. The third, post-revolutionary period saw a more liberal, pluralistic political process, within which women were able to gain significant representation in decision-making bodies and influence the constitutional drafting process. This was in part made possible by the fact that even before the uprising, there existed a framework for women's rights (the CSP) and women's organizations in which women operated. As Norbakk notes, "the active involvement of women and an organised women's movement in politics has

increased throughout the history of independent Tunisia – from the top-down, authoritarian approach of the *Bourguiba* administration to the active leadership at both central and grassroots levels that influences Tunisia today”⁴⁷. As such, being a popular agenda item for politicians seeking to consolidate power in a country that has historically been open to considering alternative interpretations to religion, women’s rights in Tunisia became a hot debate topic on the political level both pre and post revolution. This means that women’s issues are being taken seriously, and that women themselves have the chance to fight for their rights from the top-down and from the bottom-up as politicians, decision makers, citizens and members of women’s rights organizations and initiatives.

While the interplay of religion and politics is typically considered a hindrance to women achieving equality in traditional societies, the case of Tunisia is a rare example of how the interaction of religious and political forces within the country saw women gaining significantly more rights than their counterparts in other Arabic Muslim countries. As Charrad states, “once Tunisia became identified with woman friendly legislation earlier than other countries in the Arab-Islamic world, it became a matter of national pride and international recognition to continue on that path”⁴⁸. However, although the Jasmine Revolution “was an opportunity for progressive constitutional change in Tunisia, and despite the fact that the country is making greater progress than others in the MENA region, it has also reinforced forces of social conservatism, including patriarchy, which may act as a constraint to further advances in gender equality”⁴⁹. This is a natural consequence of pluralistic politics in which all voices have a right to be heard. The art of politics is to find compromises that are acceptable to all involved parties. While many feared that the emergence of the Al-Nahda party would mark the end of an era of historically won women’s rights, the Islamist party has shown that it is still willing to be flexible and open to discussion with its secular counterparts.

The political system in Lebanon, on the other hand, marginalises women from participating in the political and decision-making processes of their country. The consociational democratic system of Lebanon is an immensely patriarchal one, in which decisions are made within clientelistic networks that are generally unwelcoming to new faces, including female participants. Very few women have managed to be nominated for elections and even less have won enough votes to earn a seat in the parliament. Most of the women who have been represented in the parliament are the so-called ‘women in black’, who are seat holders given the positions because their recently deceased fathers or husbands are considered as part of the ‘inner network’. In a patriarchal system, it is extremely difficult for a women to become part of that inner network based on

47 Mari Norbakk, *The women’s rights champion: Tunisia’s potential for furthering women’s rights*. . . p. 16.

48 Mona M. Charrad, *Tunisia at the Forefront of the Arab World: Two Waves of Gender Legislation*. *Washington and Lee Law Review*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 2007, pp. 1513-1527.

49 Victoria Chambers, Clare Cummings, “Building Momentum: Women’s Empowerment in Tunisia”. . . p. 42.

her own merit and not because of who she is related or married to. This political system has also resulted in an extremely unstable political process, inadequate infrastructure and a crashing economy, thus creating an even more challenging environment for women and their issues to get representation on the political level. The instability of the internal economic and political situation has pushed the issue of women's rights even further down the agenda. This means that not only is it extremely difficult for women to be represented on the political level, but that NGOs and other organizations that deal with issues of women's rights and protection need to step-up and fill the gap that the Lebanese government is unwilling and incapable of filling. NGOs also rose and spread in the absence of a women's social movement. The work of these NGOs, however, is 'cause-oriented', meaning that they focus on a certain issue facing women such as sexual violence and providing trainings and skills that would help women enter the work force. As such, while these NGOs do lobby for or against certain laws and amendments, their direct goal is not organising a woman's movement and advocating for female political representation. Another problem facing women's organization is that, as can be incurred by the four waves identified by Mitri, they have been influenced by internal and global ideological waves and trends, such as the nationalist wave during the times of French colonialism, leftist thought after independence and the anti-globalism, radical feminist trend most recently. As such, there has not been continuity in the thought and direction of women's organisations, which consequently decreases their effectiveness. Women were active participants in the October 2019 protests which led to the resignation of the government and the appointment of a new Cabinet of Ministers which saw a record number of female ministers. However, the state of economic and political decay in which the country finds itself in pushes women's rights for equal political representation to the bottom of the agenda.

The patriarchal nature of the society in both countries makes the idea of a female politician unacceptable to a significant portion of the population. For a woman to become a politician, she needs first to get her family's support and approval before attempting to find a political party or candidate list on which she can be nominated. An important question here is whether society as a whole is prepared to accept such changes. We should not forget about the strong enough influence of religious traditions on the society of these countries. The government's adoption of women's rights in Tunisia, while just a facade to further its political goals, has provided women with a framework of rights (the CSP) and an infrastructure of women's organizations that have been operating for a long time. The formation of the Lebanese government, on the other hand, is determined by the population's religious configuration, in which Muslims and Christians are the two biggest religious groups in the country. Each of the 18 identified confessional groups is headed by a za'im who serves as the decision-maker on behalf of all his constituents. As these groups quarrel over power and

representation, women's issues are persistently ignored and considered as unimportant, unlike in Tunisia where they were politicised for political gains. It cannot be said that the rights earned by Tunisian women came by easy, however, it is evident that state support of the feminist cause, even if just superficially, creates an environment in which women can organise and lobby for their interest. Moreover, the existence of a certain level of stability in regard to internal politics naturally creates more opportunities for women to further their rights. While Tunisia is a majority Muslim country who's constitution identifies Islam as the official religion, its women enjoy much more political rights and freedoms than their Lebanese counterparts despite the fact that Lebanon is a mixed Muslim and Christian country. As such, the cases of Tunisia and Lebanon show that the political opportunities available to women are not limited by religion itself, but rather depend on the stability of the country's political process and on different approaches to interpreting and utilizing religion for the purpose of consolidating and maintaining power.

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УЛОГА ЖЕНА У ПОЛИТИЧКОМ ЖИВОТУ АРАПСКО-МУСЛИМАНСКИХ ЗЕМАЉА: ПРИМЕРИ ИЗ ТУНИСА И ЛИБАНА

Сажетак

Овај чланак истиче важност партиципације жена у друштвено-политичком животу сваке земље. Иако је већина европских земаља направила напредак у овом аспекту, за остале земље света, укључујући и оне у арапско-муслиманском свету, једнакост полова остаје и даље проблем. Међутим, разумевање важности за партиципацију жена у јавном и политичком животу расте. Једнака репрезентација жена у локалним владама, законодавним и представничким телима, директно се односи на економски и друштвено-политички развој. У овом раду користимо примере из Туниса и Либана, које иако су арапске земље ипак примењују секуларни принцип, и анализирамо историјски развој “женских питања” у њима. Међутим, како је традиција, али и религија, и даље веома снажан политички и друштвени фактор у овим земљама, она утиче на тренутно стање једнакости полова и представља препреку за улогу жена у политици. Посебан део чланка посвећен је моделу једнакости полова из Туниса, који је показао позитивне резултате и може да користи као модел и за остале земље региона.

Кључне речи: Тунис, Либан, једнакост полова, ислам, хришћанство, “државни феминизам”

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