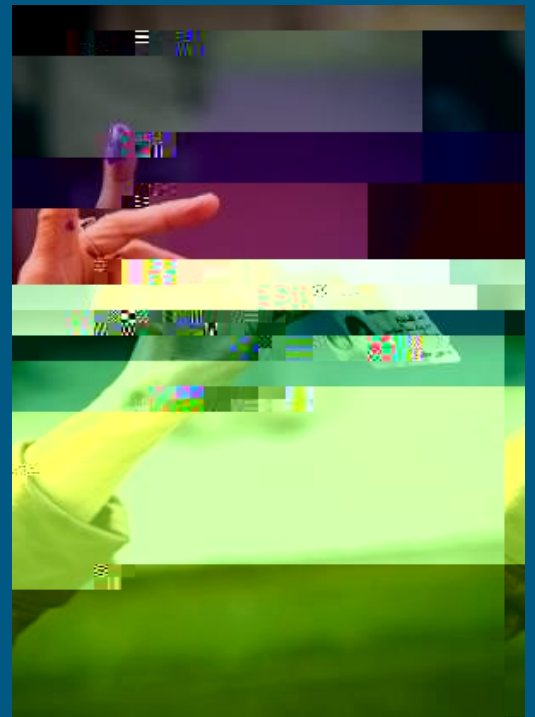
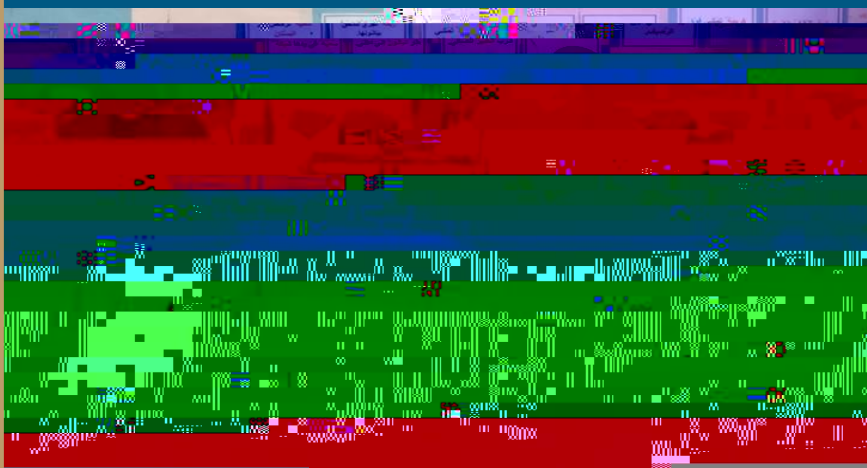


October 30, 2020

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



THE  
TUNISIAN CENTER











## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

### TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Acknowledgements.....</u>	<u>1.....</u>
<u>Executive Summary.....</u>	<u>2.....</u>
<u>Introduction.....</u>	<u>4.....</u>
<u>Methodology and Approach.....</u>	<u>5.....</u>
<u>Legal and Electoral Framework for Women's Political Participation.....</u>	<u>6...</u>
<u>Women's Participation in Public Life.....</u>	<u>7.....</u>
<u>Women's Participation in Voter Registration.....</u>	<u>9.....</u>
<u>Women's Participation in Voting and on Election Day.....</u>	<u>12...</u>
<u>Women's Participation as Aspirants and Candidates.....</u>	<u>16...</u>
<u>Women's Participation in Governance.....</u>	<u>23.....</u>
<u>Recommendations.....</u>	<u>25.....</u>
<u>Appendices.....</u>	<u>28.....</u>
<u>ANNEX A: Focus Group Implementation.....</u>	<u>28.....</u>
I. Focus Group Schedule.....	28.....
II. Focus Group Statistical data.....	29.....
III. Map of Focus Group Locations.....	31.....
<u>ANNEX B: ModerationGuide (Sample Questions).....</u>	<u>32...</u>



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

### Executive Summary

In May 2019, the Carter Center deployed an international election observation mission to observe the presidential and legislative elections in Tunisia. Part of the mission's objective was to identify barriers to





## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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

### *Recommendations*

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

## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

### Introduction

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

Gender politics and women's rights emerged as a central feature of political discourse immediately after Tunisia's 2011 revolution. Partly as a way to grapple with Tunisia's long history of state feminism, discussions about women's rights served as proxies for bigger conversations on Tunisian identity, democratic transition, and the nature of the Second Republic. As a result, the interim governmental authority included a gender parity provision in the decree law governing the 2011 election, on 4 (y t)2.31 ( f)2.7 (

## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

registration, election observers have noted that women voters have also proved to be a difficult group to mobilize since 2011<sup>8</sup>.

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

### Methodology and Approach

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

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

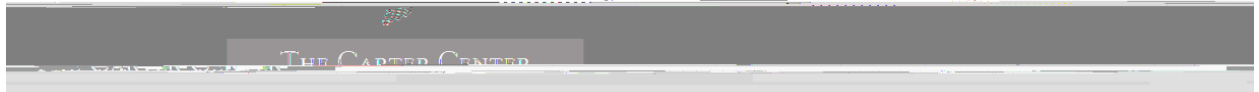
Before conducting the focus groups, the Center developed a moderation guide in collaboration with ATIDE and ELKA. Topics included: social, economic, and political issues facing participants in their communities, relationship to political elites and institutions, barriers to inclusion in registration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

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

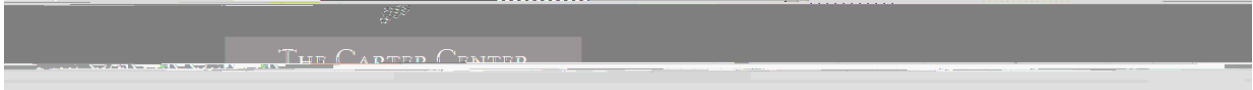
To further refine its survey research and identify barriers facing women seeking elected office and working in politics and civil society, The Center conducted 50 in-depth interviews between December 2019 and March 2020. Interviewees included male and female MPs from a wide cross-section of political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

<sup>8</sup> The Carter Center, Enhancing Citizen Participation in Tunisia: Final Report, April 2019.

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



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia



Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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

Woman in 35+ focus group in Le Kef

Gendered Access to Public Space! With the relegation of women to the private



## Women’s Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Women’s Participation in Voter Registration

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

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

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

## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

information.<sup>22</sup>

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







## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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

Women’s Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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

Woman in 35+ focus group in Le Kef

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

Woman in 35+ focus group in Medenine

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

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

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

Woman in youth focus group from Tunis

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

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

Unemployment was the biggest concern for participants in all 20 focus groups, including long-term, chronic unemployment and also youth unemployment for university graduates and non-graduates. Participants described clientelism and having existing connections as the only pathway to employment; consequently, women especially are forced in



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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

Relationships between Voters, Candidates and Political Parties





## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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

Underrepresentation in Political Parties Political parties are heavily male-dominated institutions. There are 221 registered political parties in Tunisia; only three are led by women. Both female presidential candidates—Abir Moussi (3.1%) and Leïla Trabelsi (1.8%)—are members of political parties.





## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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


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

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

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

Female civil society activist

In addition, sometimes campaign events are in ~~male~~ cafés and spaces, which are socially inappropriate



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## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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

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

Woman MP in parliament

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

Woman MP in parliament

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

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

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

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

[https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/final\\_012019\\_iri\\_tunisia\\_poll.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/final_012019_iri_tunisia_poll.pdf)

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



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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

### Women's Participation in Governance

Standing in elections and being elected is not sufficient to guarantee women's full participation in the public affairs of the country. Rather, to comply with international and regional standards, women must be fully integrated in the public affairs of the state. States must take necessary measures to ensure women's substantive contributions of women, policies.



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

### Recommendations

#### TO THE ISIE

1. Build a more robust gender mainstreaming program for unregistered women by developing regionally and subregionally responsive plans in consultation with regional coordinators of the ISIE and Tunisian and other CSOs to target unregistered women.
2. Expand focus on door-to-door registration particularly in rural areas, order to reach women who do not work outside the home and women who do not take their national ID cards with them on a daily basis.
3. Coordinate with Ministry of Interin5-the03 Tc k/3 (h M)1.2 (i4 (i)2e.7 ( t)2.3 (h 0.001 T.3 (h 03gb-3







## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

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



## Women’s Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

### Appendices

#### ANNEX A: Focus Group Implementation

##### I. Focus Group Schedule

Region	City	Date	Target groups
		1/4/2020	Unregistered >35
North-west	Le Kef		Registered 18-35, mixed voters/nonvoters



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

### II. Focus Group Statistical data

#### Total Focus Groups

#### Unregistered Women

City	Nb. of FG	
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## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

### Registered Women

City





## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

### ANNEX B: Moderation Guide (Sample Questions)

#### IMPORTANT ISSUES & RELATIONSHIP TO ELITES

1. What are the most important issues to you? In your community? In Tunisia? To women?
  - a. Do politicians talk about these issues?
  - b. Do politicians or parties care about these issues too?
- 2.



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia

### 5. How can Tunisia



## Women's Participation in the 2019 Elections in Tunisia



