



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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## "Progress and Challenges to Women's Empowerment: Lessons from Tunisia"

*The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*

**Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, 1300 Pennsylvania Ave.**

**September 9, 2010, 11:00am-12:00pm**

The Woodrow Wilson Center hosted an event today focusing on the state of women's rights and empowerment in Tunisia and elsewhere. It featured Professor **Nabiha Gueddana**, President and Director-General of the National Agency for Family and Population, former Secretary of State in charge of Women and Family Affairs, and former chair of "Partners in Population and Development: South-South Initiative." The event was moderated by **Haleh Esfandiari**, director of the Middle East Program at the Wilson Center.

In a few opening remarks, Esfandiari explained that Dr. Gueddana is being considered for the position of Under-Secretary-General for a new UN gender equality agency that would subsume the four UN entities that currently specialize in gender issues. She expressed that, were Dr. Gueddana to be selected for the position, it would be a "big gain" for women in the Islamic world.

Dr. Gueddana, in prepared remarks, spoke for about 30 minutes about her experience growing up in Tunisia and her views on how best to advance women's development in the Muslim world and elsewhere.

She started by explaining that during the 1950s, before Tunisia's independence, women were largely poor and illiterate. Under the pretext of Islam, women were repressed and treated as second-class citizens. In the lead-up to Tunisian independence in 1956, however, there were calls from high political levels to ensure fundamental rights for women. Dr. Gueddana told an anecdote about seeing **Habib Bourguiba**, the first president of the independent Tunisia, remove the veil of a female supporter in a showing of liberalization and freedom for women. Dr. Gueddana stated that the women around her expressed both joy and apprehension at Bourguiba's act, sensing that the removal of the veil was inevitable in the modernization of Tunisian society.

Dr. Gueddana listed some of the important changes that took place following independence, including a ban on polygamy, the entrance of women into the economic life of the community and country, nearly universal education, better health care, and better access to family planning services.

Dr. Gueddana asserted that Tunisia has changed for the better in the last several decades: with a history of strong and influential women, the country is a beacon for other Muslim societies in terms of its openness and progressive stance on women's rights. She presented demographic data to demonstrate her point, noting that in 1966, women had an average of seven children and had a life expectancy of 50 years. Today, in contrast, women bear an average of only two children and have a life expectancy of 76 years. Under the current president **Zine El Abidine Ben Ali**, Dr. Gueddana contended, there have been notable improvements in economic growth and gender equality in Tunisia.

Dr. Gueddana then provided a brief overview of a cooperative project that she led between government entities in Tunisia and Niger, with the involvement of France and the UN. The initiative sought to improve health care for pregnant women and make motherhood safer in developing areas.

She expressed the hope that her own story - in which she witnessed her country move from a society that repressed women to one that empowers them - can demonstrate to other women that situations can improve and change, and that women can be agents in that process.

Dr. Gueddana then explained the initiatives she would pursue if she were selected to head the new UN agency on gender. She stated that she would seek the full achievement of the UN Millennium Development Goals and would work to promote women's integration in social and economic sectors throughout the world. She expressed the need for additional funds from donor states to help improve women's health initiatives, fight violence and sexual abuse against women, and promote both South-South and South-North partnerships. She said that she would work closely with UN teams and offices to create a united network to fight discrimination against women wherever and however it occurs.

In the question-and-answer portion, in which Dr. Gueddana responded to questions in French and a translator relayed them to the audience in English, several audience members asked for more details about the state of women and women's empowerment in Tunisia. One attendee asked if Tunisian men have changed their attitudes in recent decades about the role and status of women - to this, Dr. Gueddana responded that yes, men in Tunisia have largely adopted a tolerant and fair reading of Islam and have embraced gender equality and tolerance.

Another attendee asked about the future of the veil in Tunisia. He observed that Dr. Gueddana had spoken about the veil as if it were a symbol of oppression, but pointed out that many women now are choosing to wear the veil. In some states, such as Tunisia, there are restrictions on the veil (for example, it is prohibited in some schools, government buildings, and other public places), and he asked if Dr. Gueddana supports the right of women to choose whether they wear the veil. She responded that she fully supports the right of women to make that choice, and clarified that what she opposes is the use of the veil as a political tool for extremists.

Another audience member asked about the role of women in political life and governance in Tunisia, to which Dr. Gueddana responded that women are active in local and national politics, and that 30% of government representatives in Tunisia are women. She expressed that the real challenge is promoting women's participation in governance in other places in the world, where women are more excluded from politics. In addition to political participation, Dr. Gueddana added, it is important to ensure that women have access to the economic system.

Another question dealt with the rights and status of rural women, who generally face more hurdles than urban women in achieving full and fair participation in public life. Gueddana responded that it is important to focus on projects like education, employment (which is low for rural women in the Middle East) and economic empowerment. She also noted that without better health care and access to family planning services, women will continue to have low life expectancy and high numbers of children - in those conditions, women do not have the time or resources to participate in governance and public life.

A few audience members also asked about her expected efforts in the UN, if she were chosen to head the new UN agency on gender issues. Esfandiari pointed out that the UN is quite bureaucratic and asked Dr. Gueddana to explain exactly what she would hope to achieve in that environment. Dr. Gueddana responded with optimism, asserting that it is still possible to make change and implement new programs in the UN, despite the bureaucracy. She stated her belief that UN bureaucrats should leave their offices and go into the field to learn what exactly is happening on the ground regarding women's rights.

Another attendee asked Dr. Gueddana how organizations like the UN can engage in meaningful dialogue with more conservative governments, since the West cannot impose its own beliefs and values on those societies. Dr. Gueddana indicated that framing is important: if a government minister prioritizes employment issues at the expense of women's issues, for example, officials at the UN or other organizations can make the link explicit between fertility/population issues and employment (that is, that women who do not have access to family planning will continue to have more children than the domestic labor market can support).

In addition, one audience member noted that there have been different frontiers of women's empowerment over the decades - there was a period when it was thought that education was the most crucial tool for women's empowerment, then there was a period when it was thought that political participation was the best mechanism for advancement. The audience member asked about the next frontier, asking Dr. Gueddana to speculate what she thinks might be the next area where efforts will be focused. Dr. Gueddana responded that both the Global North and the Global South have a responsibility to make progress on women's issues, citing **Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's** assertion that women's rights are an integral component of human rights more broadly. She proposed that the use of sexual violence towards women as a tool of war is an area in which there should be additional international attention.

Another person asked about the varying languages that women's rights activists use to talk about women's empowerment. In the Muslim world, for example, some women have adopted an Islamic feminist language, while others have advocated for more secular feminist frameworks. Dr. Gueddana commented that there are different types of discussions about women's rights in different parts of the world, and lamented that some religious leaders have used Islam and Shari'a law to justify keeping women in second-class citizen status. She suggested that those leaders should be asked to explain their views publicly and be held accountable. In addition, she expressed the need for international institutions and organizations to engage with more tolerant religious leaders that support gender equality.