

# Women's Rights in Tunisia: Progress or Reform? Emily Proskine (Tunisia 2003)

## Biography

I graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in leadership and international studies from the University of Richmond in 1999 where I also played Division I lacrosse. As a junior in college, I studied abroad at the Universidad de Sevilla, Spain. After college, I pursued my interests in international studies at the Monterey Institute where I received a masters in international policy studies in 2003 with concentrations in gender and development and conflict resolution. I conducted an independent research project on gender policy and the state in Tunisia as a Boren Fellow and Fulbright Scholar where I worked extensively with women's NGOs. After returning from Tunisia, I attended law school at UC Berkeley Boalt Hall where I participated in the International Human Rights Law Clinic. As a member of the International Human Rights Law Clinic, my team brought a claim before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights against the U.S. on behalf of the victims of Hurricane Katrina. While at Boalt I also published an article entitled "Google's Technicolor Dreamcoat: A Copyright Analysis of the Google Book Search Library Project." I received my juris doctorate in 2007 and was admitted to practice law in California in December 2007. I am now in my second year as an associate at Ropes & Gray LLP where I practice corporate law. I also represent San Francisco and Marin Counties on the Board of the California Young Lawyers Association.

## Background

Tunisia is heralded as one of the most progressive countries in the Arab world with regards to its gender policy. Women have received nearly equal rights to men and have access to education, participate in government and make up a large part of the workforce. However, top-down legislative reform and a lack of civil society have allowed control of the women's movement to remain in the hands of the central government. In fact, a government sponsored women's rights NGO, Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisie, is the face of the women's movement in Tunisia and abroad -- strict governmental regulations that require NGOs to become licensed effectively prohibit grass roots level women's rights organizations from forming. The result is that women's rights, albeit abundant in discourse, are limited in practice and knowledge of rights and the implementation of mechanisms that promote and enforce women's rights are stymied. Without a civil society to monitor government accountability and compliance, external reporting (including shadow reporting) to international organizations such as the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has provided a degree of checks and balances. Using the Tunisian context as an example, I propose a discussion on women's rights in North Africa/Middle East, the importance of grass roots movements, the possibility for reform from within a highly policed state and the effectiveness/impact of international monitoring/reporting.

## Discussions Questions

1. Is it important for women's rights (or any rights for that matter) to be generated by a grass roots movement or is the institution of legal reform from government/ law makers sufficient for achieving equality? Why or why not? Can grass roots movements exist in a country where there is no freedom of association? How?
2. If women are granted equal rights to men legally, what barriers still exist to equality? How can these barriers be overcome? Perhaps the table can discuss former Fulbright projects/experiences that seek to overcome inequality in diverse settings.
3. The Tunisian government has outlawed outward signs of Islamism in public. Is this problematic from the perspective of women's rights? Why? Where else have we seen such governmental prohibitions of religion? culture? ethnicity?
4. Can pressure to reform women's rights (or any rights for that matter) come from outside the state? How? Perhaps discuss examples of situations in which pressure from the international community caused a government to change its course (either positively or negatively). What good can come from a situation in which a government takes pride in its reputation as a progressive State at the international level but lacks energy to create reform on the ground?
5. One regional expert says that western feminists miss the progress being made in terms of women's' rights in Islamic societies because they fail to recognize the logic of the kin-based model of social and political life, which she contrasts with the Western class-centered model. What do we see if we look at feminism through the lens of culture, ethnicity and religion?