



# WOMEN'S RIGHTS

a study of

# IRAN & TUNISIA



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## ABSTRACT

What factor is the most important determinant of a successful expansion of women's rights? Through my research, I have concluded that societal norms are the most crucial factors in the expansion of women's rights. As a reflection of collective attitudes and expectations, norms determine how willing a society is to adopt new ideas about women's rights and gender parity. However, these norms and expectations must be a genuine reflection of public sentiment and not simply imposed on an unwilling population. The two cases I have examined in this essay are the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution of 2011. These cases have different outcomes: Tunisia experienced an expansion of women's rights while a retraction of those rights occurred in Iran. Both cases prove that women's rights are only expanded when a society believes that they align with its values and supports their integration.



## PART I

This past year, women's rights issues have made headlines around the world. In the United States, the #MeToo movement has inspired women to fight back against normalized sexual violence. Saudi Arabia has announced that women will be legally allowed to drive for the first time beginning this June. The Democratic Republic of Congo, a country plagued by deep-rooted violence, has appointed a historic number of women to serve in peace-building efforts. Women in Iran have begun publicly protesting the government's mandatory veiling policy. These events, among others, have led to this question: what factor is the most important determinant of a successful expansion of women's rights? Women's rights are defined as "legal, political, and social rights for women equal to those of men."<sup>1</sup> This analysis will determine whether an expansion of women's rights has taken place by examining policy changes as well as political representation and economic opportunity. Some favorable policy changes for women include elevated personal autonomy, economic rights, reproductive rights, and greater access to education, but for these changes to be successful, they must take root long-term. Through two historical cases, I will examine the factors that allow women to obtain more rights in some cases and not in others. I will look at an expansion of women's rights when they are already enfranchised;

these gains are focused on gender parity rather than suffrage. This paper will examine how women's rights issues become salient and how they transform from ideas into concrete changes.

To determine which cultural, economic, or political factor is most important to the expansion of women's rights, I will examine two cases: the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution of 2011. Through my research, I have discovered three powerful arguments that attempt to answer my central question. In looking at the Iranian Revolution and the Jasmine Revolution, I will be able to assess the validity and explanatory power of the following arguments: (1) Revolutions that result in regime changes lead to an increase in women's rights and political representation in the creation of the new government. (2) Societal norms are integral to the successful increase of women's rights. (3) Women have more rights and opportunities when a state's economy is growing and prosperous. After equally assessing all cases, my research has shown that Argument 2 on societal norms is the strongest because it explains why women's rights increased in Tunisia but not in Iran. Argument 2 emphasizes the importance of societal norms and, consequently, how those norms shape the willingness of a society<sup>2</sup> to accept an increase in women's rights. Women's rights will not successfully expand if the public feels that increased opportunity and parity

for women are against their cultural values and identity, as was the case in Iran. As evidenced by the case of Tunisia, women's rights will only be successful when a society sees increasing women's rights as consistent with its core values. I also found that the economic basis of Argument 3 does have some factual support, but it lacks consistent explanatory power. The level of women's rights in both Iran and Tunisia did coincide with the level of economic growth and prosperity that the country was experiencing. However, Argument 3 is weakened by the fact that it fails to account for the economic discontent that was rampant among both populations. Argument 1 was the least valuable because revolution that led to regime change was present in both cases, but only Tunisia experienced an increase in women's rights. Therefore, this variable is not a reliable determinant of an expansion of women's rights.

The rest of this essay will build upon the evidence and arguments that I have briefly presented above. In Part II, I will outline the logic behind each of my three competing arguments and present relevant literature that supports these claims. I will outline the evidence that would need to be present in each case in order to determine its validity. In Part III, I will compare the cases of Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution and the Iranian revolution. I will specifically highlight the evidence that strengthens or supports each competing argument. Finally, I will con-

clude by noting the relevant implications of my study for scholarship and policy in Part IV.

## PART II: REVOLUTION, CULTURE, AND ECONOMICS

There are three powerful arguments that seek to answer the question of what factor is the most important determinant of a successful expansion of women's rights. All of these arguments assume that women are already enfranchised. Citizenship and the right to vote "[serve] as the legitimate basis for future claims on the state, new demands for extended rights, and new social movements."<sup>3</sup> I will explore the expansion of women's rights from this point of enfranchisement, such as increased political representation and concrete policy changes.

**ARGUMENT 1:** Revolutions that result in regime changes lead to an increase of women's rights and political representation in the creation of the new government.

This theory argues that revolutions that result in a change of the state's regime lead to an increase in women's rights. During the revolution, women utilize the social upheaval to work in new roles that are not usually available to them. After the revolution, women leverage that participation to obtain more power and representation in the new government, as well



as to promote favorable policy changes. A regime change must be present for this argument to hold. Rights expand when women's voices are present in the creation of the new government, and this is not true when revolutions are unsuccessful. This argument was inspired by "The Iraqi Women," a chapter of *What Kind of Liberation?: Women and the Occupation of Iraq* by Nadie Al-Ali, Nicola Pratt, and Cynthia Enloe. The authors argue that women felt liberated by the new roles and opportunities that they had during the American occupation of Iraq, and then shifted their attention toward a more politically charged movement.<sup>4</sup> This book focuses on war, but I am translating social upheaval presented here into that which is caused by a revolutionary regime change. Another piece that utilizes this argument is "Where do African women have more power? Surprise- in countries emerging from war" by Aili Mari Tripp. Tripp argues that "post-conflict countries had considerably higher rates of female political representation" than those who did not recently experience conflict.<sup>5</sup> This occurs because "during conflicts, women are pushed into new roles in the economy, in their households and communities and even in national politics."<sup>6</sup> In order for me to find this argument convincing, women need to be given rights and more political opportunities at the onset of the new regime, because that will show whether revolution and regime changes

themselves increase women's rights.

**ARGUMENT 2:** Societal norms are necessary for the successful increase of women's rights.

Norms are the factors that lay beneath policy changes and women's political representation; they are vital to the deep-rooted success of women's rights movements. I define norms as informal understandings and social expectations that govern the behavior of members of society. In "Women's Rights as Human Rights: An International Perspective," Marian Lief Palley argues that cultural constraints determine a society's willingness to implement more rights for women. The industrialization and modernization of a country does not mean that its social norms will be redefined because behavioral culture often remains stubbornly tied to tradition.<sup>7</sup> In "The True Clash of Civilizations," Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris argue that the culture and history of a nation determine the rights of women: "A society's commitment to gender equality and sexual liberation proves...how strongly that society supports principles of tolerance and egalitarianism."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the acceptance and perpetuation of women's rights are dependent upon the expectations, values, and identity of a given nation. Governments have tried to force change in regard to women's rights by imposing legislation and granting political representation. However, if the decisions do not align with

society's norms, these measures will not create deep-rooted change. Norms need to be absorbed by society to be influential, and policies that contradict them can be viewed as a betrayal of national culture, identity, and values.

How can societal norms be changed? International influence plays a huge role in exposing citizens and rulers alike to new ways of thinking and is often a large part of a country's decision to expand women's rights. International institutions and transnational advocacy networks are some formal ways to define and spread international norms. They often frame "women's political empowerment in terms of modernity, which carries expectations not only of improved status in the world, but also of financial rewards."<sup>9</sup> The international women's movement has actively promoted a discourse on gender inclusion, ensuring that norms about female rights, equality, and participation in economics and politics are transmitted to nation-states.<sup>10</sup> However, international norms can also be proliferated through more informal means such as trade, media, and travel. International norms can influence leaders and take a top-down path, or they can permeate the popular level and make the public aware of different ways of living. Pressure to heed the example of other countries is an important way that societal norms can change, but this only matters if the nation's people and government are open to change and the infiltra-

tion of new ideas.

**ARGUMENT 3:** Women have more rights and opportunities when a state's economy is growing and prosperous.

This theory argues that the economy is the most important determinant of women's rights. Raquel Fernández makes this argument in her article entitled "Women's Rights and Development:" "In almost all industrialized countries, women went from being the properties of their husbands and/or fathers, with very few legal rights, to possessing the same political rights and most of the same economic rights as men."<sup>11</sup> When an economy is doing well, there are more jobs for everyone, so women are better able to leverage their contributions to the workforce into concrete policy changes. Economic development generates changed attitudes in virtually any society. In particular, modernization compels systematic, predictable changes in gender roles.<sup>12</sup> This argument from "The True Clash of Civilizations" maintains that economics change societal expectations about gender because growth grants women new economic and professional opportunities. I will look specifically at developing countries where economic growth and industrialization are still relatively new. I will measure economic growth and prosperity through reports of international institutions, industrialization initiatives, and growth in GDP, and then compare it to the subsequent position



of women in each country. For this argument to be valid, economic growth must coincide with increased rights and political representation for women.

## PART III: WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN IRAN AND TUNISIA

The two cases that I will examine are the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution of 2011. I chose these cases for a few reasons. First, a revolution that led to regime change is present in both cases. This will allow me to accurately assess whether or not regime change is a reliable cause of the expansion of women's rights. Second, Iran and Tunisia were both developing economically during the time periods that I am researching, so I will be able to discern whether economic growth and stability coincide with more opportunities for women. Third, Iran and Tunisia are both countries with Muslim majorities. Tunisia was a French colony, and although Iran managed to evade colonization, it was influenced by the British Empire for its natural resources. Both countries have a largely Muslim identity with a history of Western influence, which will serve as helpful control factors to see why women's rights increased after the revolution in Tunisia and not in Iran.

## BACKGROUND ON THE IRANIAN AND TUNISIAN

## REVOLUTIONS

The goal of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 was to push Mohammad Reza Pahlavi out of power. The Pahlavi period had been one of modernization, industrialization, and secularization in Iran. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's father, Reza Shah, "introduced policies that altered the lives of Persian women radically...For the first time, some women entered into modern sectors of the economy, family laws were modified, unveiling was enforced, and public co-educational primary schools were established in 1936."<sup>13</sup> Women were also given the right to vote under the Pahlavis. After the revolution, a new Islamist regime headed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was instated. This shift in the political rule of Iran resulted in the decline of women's rights and political participation, which undid much of the progress made during the Pahlavi era. Feminism and women's rights were viewed as fundamentally incompatible with the tenets of Islam and were rejected as a result of the public's dissatisfaction with the imposed secularism and Westernization of the shahs' regimes.

Tunisia has long been considered the beacon of modernization in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. Since its independence from France in 1956, the Tunisian government has placed an emphasis on securing and advancing women's rights. Tunisia has long occupied an important position in the

Arab world since the historic promulgation of its progressive family law in 1956, which placed the country at the forefront of the Arab world in regard to women's rights.<sup>14</sup> Even the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali continued this progress. However, both men and women were increasingly dissatisfied with Ben Ali's repressive government, and that frustration blossomed into the Jasmine Revolution of 2011. This was the first successful regime change of the Arab Spring and it inspired revolutions across the Arab world. The end of Ben Ali's regime brought with it a new democratic government and a significant increase in women's political representation. Women maintained the rights that they had been afforded prior to the revolution and enacted further reform as a result of their political voice. Why were Tunisian women able to keep and build upon their rights in the new regime while Iranian women were not?

## REGIME CHANGE

### THROUGH REVOLUTION

#### IRAN

I will first examine the claim that revolutions that result in a regime change lead to the increase of women's rights and political representation in the creation of the new government. It is first important to discern whether women were active participants in the Iranian Revolution, as this is an inextricable condition for this

argument. Surprisingly, although the shah had granted women new rights and opportunities, women rallied around the Islamist revolution in incredible numbers. If we believe that Iranian women are rational actors and responsible individuals capable of taking their destiny into their own hands...then we must be able to explain the massive support that women lent to the revolution and in its aftermath.<sup>15</sup> Khomeini inspired women to back the revolutionary efforts, and their support was instrumental to his success. Women were certainly present in the Iranian Revolution and adopted new political roles during the protests. The Islamic revolution broke the barrier overnight. When Khomeini called for women who would otherwise not have dreamt of leaving their homes without their husbands' or fathers' permission or presence, took to the streets.<sup>16</sup> In fact, women helped to make the Iranian Revolution one of the most bloodless in history because of their large turnouts at protests which made soldiers hesitant to use violence to subdue them. But were they able to leverage those goals in the creation of the new regime?

Although women were a large part of the success of the Iranian Revolution, "the militant left assumed a passive attitude toward women's causes."<sup>17</sup> Women's issues were not central to the goals of the revolutionaries. Women were viewed as instruments for success instead of



agents that needed to be empowered by the new regime. However, this may be partly the fault of the women themselves. As Ashraf Zahedi states, “Women participating in the revolution adhered to different political ideologies, some secular, others religious. They did not participate in the revolution as women and they did not put forward a political platform advancing their cause. They subordinated their own cause to that of the revolution.”<sup>18</sup> Women did not fight explicitly for their rights and representation in the new government, so it was not a major consideration of the revolutionaries.

After the revolution, women lost many of the rights that they had been granted in the Pahlavi era. Iranian women essentially took a giant step backward. Although the 1979 revolution in Iran is often called an Islamic revolution, it can actually be said to be a revolution of men against women. It led to the enactment of numerous discriminatory laws against women, which effectively took the society backward in time.<sup>19</sup> In the decade following the revolution, women in the workforce fell from about “13 percent to 8.6 percent,”<sup>20</sup> and women were largely removed from positions of authority. Dr. Shirin Ebadi was a judge prior to the revolution and initially supported the revolutionaries’ cause, but soon after their success, the new regime decided that “women could no longer hold positions such as judges and had to instead take administrative

positions.”<sup>21</sup> Khomeini’s removal of the Family Protection Act was a huge blow to the personal autonomy of women. This act, instituted in 1967 and revised in 1975, was fundamental to the rights of women in the family. The Family Protection Act increased the marriage age to 18 for women and 20 for men, and restricted polygamy by only allowing men to marry a second wife with the consent of the court. These laws also granted the right for both men and women to file for divorce. Another change was that the courts determined which parent would gain custody of the children on a case-by-case basis, as opposed to automatically granting custody to men as had been done in the past.<sup>22</sup> Its withdrawal meant a huge decrease in the personal autonomy of women within marriage and the family.

The new Islamic regime also re-instituted a compulsory hijab law in July of 1980. As Zahedi states:

It was implemented in two phases. First, female government employees were required to comply with the compulsory hijab. Those who did not comply were fired. The second phase covered all Iranian women, including members of the religious minorities. Even girls as young as nine years old had to comply.<sup>23</sup>

With this law, women lost the right to self-expression and their bodies once again became monitored by the state. These examples show that the regime change brought about by



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the revolution was not successful in advancing women's rights, and in fact had the opposite effect. It is important to consider that success is contingent upon how well women utilize their participation in the uprising to make political and social gains. This demonstrates that revolution itself does not increase women's rights, but rather is dependent upon the attitudes of the nation and how well women themselves push for representation and consideration in the new government.

### TUNISIA

As in the case of the Iranian Revolution, "a resounding feature of the protests was the presence of women... Women participated as organizers and demonstrators and, consequently, gender equality has been central to discussions of Tunisian politics, most eminently as it relates to elections and the drafting of the constitution."<sup>24</sup> The latter part of that quote illustrates the key difference between the Tunisian and Iranian outcomes: Tunisian women utilized their positions in the revolution to make women's rights a central part of the discussion within the new government. Lawyer Bilel Larbi pointed out, "Just look at how Tunisian women stood side-by-side with Tunisian men. They came out to the streets to protest in headscarves. They came out in miniskirts. It doesn't matter. They were there."<sup>25</sup> Tunisian women were an active part of the Jasmine Revolution, and they fought collectively for women's rights and advancement. The Tunisian

women's movement has always stressed that you cannot have increased rights for women in the absence of democratic rights, social justice and liberty for all.<sup>26</sup> Tunisian women largely did not support Ben Ali because his commitment to women's rights seemed insincere, strategic, and contrived. They recognized that supporting democratic rights and social justice for all was key to continuing advancements in the department of women's rights, and Ben Ali's repressive regime certainly did not create those conditions. This is very similar to the case of Iran: the Shah instituted many reforms that benefited women, yet his authenticity was a point of concern and debate. In both cases, women wanted to expand their rights and representation according to their own definitions of what is important.

After the revolution, Tunisian women's groups held various public protest to ensure that women would be included in the leadership of the new government.<sup>27</sup> In Iran, women were not aggressive about explicitly promoting their goals. Contrastingly, the primary focus of Tunisian women was expanding women's rights throughout the revolution, and they continued to be vocal about enforcing change at the creation of the new government. Tunisian women were unrelentingly passionate and tenacious in working to obtain their goals: "The mass demonstrations that witnessed the extensive participation of Tunisian women were a preliminary

sign of the transformations to come through their participation in popular elections, their ascension to political power, and the debates to which they contributed in regard to the drafting of the constitution.”<sup>28</sup> Women in the Jasmine Revolution leveraged their support for the revolutionaries to push for increased representation in the fledgling democratic government. As a result, there was a “transformation of Tunisian politics...in which Tunisian women, Islamist and other, have been central figures.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, “there is a constitutional mandate for parity in the election lists: every party is obliged to field 50 percent women in elections.”<sup>30</sup>

The argument that regime change via revolution gives women more rights in the new government leaves the following question unanswered: why were Tunisian women able to achieve increased rights and representation as a result of the revolution while Iranian women were not? This argument lacks factual basis and



explanatory power because revolution led to an increase in women’s rights in one case but not the other. Therefore, this argument in itself is not sufficient to explain my findings, and the difference in outcome must be explained by another variable.

## NORMS

### IRAN

The Iranian Revolution is unique because society shifted from progressive, secular laws and practices back to its roots as very conservatively religious. This phenomenon is explained by the fact that the changes instituted by the Pahlavi rulers were not normalized by the Iranian masses. Contact with the West exposed Iranians to new ideas about gender norms and social dynamics. The importance and pervasiveness of international norms was evident in the Pahlavi regime. The shahs’ advancements were largely made in response to the Western world’s perception of Iran as a backward, religiously zealous country. For that reason, “international pressure played a significant part in the initiation of the changes which took place in Iran in the 1960’s.”<sup>31</sup> However, only the upper class was exposed to these norms and supported their instatement in Iran.

A major example of the shah’s’ controversial modernization techniques was the unveiling of 1936. Iran was historically a Muslim

country, and the imposition of the unveiling was seen as a betrayal of its Islamic identity in favor of an inauthentically secular one. Although this mandatory unveiling only lasted from 1936 to the Reza Shah's ouster in 1941, unveiled women were given preference during his son's rule as well; they remained the image of the modern woman that Iran wanted to project to the rest of the world.<sup>32</sup> The Pahlavi's ideal woman was educated, unveiled, liberated, and entirely un-Islamic. Conservative Iranians saw her as a deep betrayal of Islam and a symbol of the Western world that had long oppressed and belittled their culture. Women's rights and liberation became synonymous with Westernization and inauthentic modernization, and were seen as a means of projecting a West-approved image of Iran. This image was also mostly confined to the upper class and did not fit the majority of Iranian women. Slowly, the revolution gathered support from women who traded their granted rights for rights they wanted to earn themselves.<sup>33</sup> Women wanted their rights on their own terms, and rights that would allow them to embrace their Muslim and female identities. For these reasons, many women came to support the revolution.

The question of the veil is illustrative of a major misstep by the Pahlavi regime: it imposed change on a society that was not ready or willing to accept it. Many felt that these policies abandoned Iran's Muslim heritage in favor of

adopting the Westernization that the nation had historically resented. Societal norms, therefore, had not changed. International norms of gender equality unquestionably infiltrated Iran during the Pahlavi era, but they did not have an authentic impact on the preferences and ideologies of the people.

The Iranian Revolution marked a resurgence of Islamic norms and ideals that had been silenced by the Pahlavi regime. In the 1970's many Iranians, dissatisfied with rapid social change and ever-increasing Western influences in Iran, turned to religion for a new social paradigm.<sup>34</sup> Islam provided them with a framework to reconstruct their ideal society and draw on their 'authentic' cultures and beliefs.<sup>35</sup> This shift from imposed Western values in regard to women's rights back to culturally authentic, Islamic interpretations of the role of women prove the importance of norms in creating lasting social change. Therefore, it is evident that norms are the true reason why women's rights movements are successful. As the Iranian Revolution demonstrated, norms cannot simply be imposed on an unwilling population. To normalize is to bring into conformity with a standard,<sup>36</sup> but these standards were not adopted or internalized by the Iranian public. The Pahlavi ideal of a liberated, modern woman was viewed as an egregious departure from the Islamic ideal, and in the end, the return to an Islamic state cleansed



Iran of international influences by ousting the Western norms with which women's rights had become synonymous.

## TUNISIA

Prior to the Jasmine Revolution, Tunisia had a history of promoting women's rights in a way that starkly contrasted with the rest of the region, including Iran. Its independence in 1956 brought immediate benefits to women and these rights became ingrained in Tunisian society: "the reality is that women's rights have been a fact of life in Tunisia for decades."<sup>37</sup> The institution of women's rights occurred with the creation of a new, autonomous Tunisian national identity, and I think that had a lot to do with its success. Societal expectations had been shaped to normalize rights for women from the beginning, and they became ingrained in both society and women themselves. Tunisian women credit the 1956 civil rights code for their freedom and equality, as well as an excellent education system that was equally accessible to both men and women.<sup>38</sup>

Surprisingly, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the nation's second president, kept the ball rolling in terms of women's rights despite his harsh authoritarian rule. For example, as recently as in 2007, the minimum age of marriage was raised to 18 for both men and women... Other reforms initiated under Ben Ali in the 2000s expanded women's rights in regard to marriage contraction, alimony, and custodial rights over

children.<sup>39</sup> However, many felt that Ben Ali's commitment to women's rights was a way to garner Western admiration and to cover up the harsh reality of his regime.<sup>40</sup> There were similar concerns that women's rights in Iran during the Pahlavi era were just for show. However, the key reason for their survival in Tunisia was that gender parity considerations were not first introduced as a part of Ben Ali's oppressive regime. Women's rights were considered important to Tunisians from the creation of their sovereign national identity, so the empowerment of women did not become synonymous with corruption and unwanted modernization as it had in Iran.

The Jasmine Revolution also marked a resurgence of political Islam in Tunisia. Many women worried that the revival of long-repressed Islamist parties would pose a threat to the advancements made by women.<sup>41</sup> It was feared that a popularization of Islamist norms and ideals would create obstacles to women's participation in the new government. As Sulehria states, "It is not clear whether Islam is the religion of the state or the society. At the same time, on the positive side, there is a commitment to universal human rights... Not only have women been acknowledged as equal, there is a commitment to empower women politically."<sup>42</sup> The political reintroduction of Islam in Tunisia ultimately did not hurt women's rights because gender equality was not viewed in opposition

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with the tenets of the Islamic tradition. In Iran, women's rights, Westernization, and the rejection of Islam came in one threatening package that needed to be removed to ensure a successful return to the country's cultural roots. Tunisia, on the other hand, had made social justice a part of its national identity from the beginning, so it did not seem like a Western import that was shoved down the throats of an unsupportive public.

## ECONOMIC STABILITY AND GROWTH

### IRAN

This section will explore the claim that women have more rights in states whose economies are growing and prosperous. I will look at the economics of the Pahlavi dynasty and compare it to the post-revolutionary Islamist regime. Between 1946 and 1979, Iran was gradually transformed from a largely farm-based economy to a modern society by way of major changes in the traditional socioeconomic order.<sup>43</sup> The state was able to create impressive growth through a combination of public planning, urbanization, and industrialization introduced by the White Revolution of 1963; its annual growth rate was about 9.6 percent from 1960-1977 and it had very low, regionalized unemployment rates.<sup>44</sup> Iran's fortunes surged even more dramatically after the explosive rise in oil prices in the 1970s, helping fuel the shah's grandiose ambitions to

overtake the French and German economies.<sup>45</sup> Iran's prospering economy aligned with the creation of new social and professional opportunities for women; women's suffrage was also a part of the White Revolution. The educational progress made during this period, combined with rapid economic growth, led to employment opportunities which facilitated the participation of Iranian women in the labor market.<sup>46</sup> Women were more educated and better able to pursue careers that matched their qualifications. This evidence supports the theory that a quickly growing and modernizing economy yields more personal, political, and economic rights for women.

Iran's economy under Ayatollah Khomeini was a different story entirely. Since the 1979 revolution, the Iranian economy has been beset by a costly eight-year war, unremitting international pressure and isolation, and ideological conflict. The revolutionaries clashed over what constituted an Islamic economy - and whether growth or social justice should be the top priority.<sup>47</sup> Khomeini struggled with the decision to pursue economic growth or social justice, and his resulting economic plans were not well thought-out. This lack of organization combined with the costly Iran-Iraq War, and the country's reliance on fluctuating oil prices put the post-revolutionary regime "on the brink of economic collapse."<sup>48</sup> Surely enough, women



also suffered. They were stripped of personal and economic rights. Although education was still very much accessible to women, “The Islamic Republic...failed to provide them with rights that would match their qualifications: women were discriminated against at court and married women were made dependent on their husbands who were often less educated than their wives.”<sup>49</sup> Comparing the economic state of Iran before and after the Iranian Revolution does support the argument that women are better off in stable and growing economies. The Pahlavi era ushered in new possibilities of economic growth and industrialization, and women in turn were granted new rights and professional opportunities. However, the post-revolutionary Islamist regime did not have a clear or sustainable economic vision for the country. The Iranian economy was in a place of incredible turmoil, and women lost many of the rights that they had won in the preceding period of greater prosperity.

## TUNISIA

In addition to its standout performance in regard to social justice, Tunisia also shone as a beacon of economic stability and growth in the MENA region. It is recognized by many as an economic success story amidst the poverty and instability of the rest of the region. This perception was cemented by the country’s progress in recent years, including its brisk recovery from the 2009 economic crisis characterized by a

GDP growth of 3.7% in 2010.<sup>50</sup> However, the country’s economic situation looked much better from the outside than it did to the majority of Tunisians: “The combination of youth graduate unemployment, conspicuous and predatory corruption as well as political and economic disenfranchisement had created an untenable condition of discontent amongst Tunisians.”<sup>51</sup> Mohammed Bouazizi, a young vendor whose produce cart was confiscated by the police, quickly became a symbol of the economic desperation shared by many Tunisian people when he self-immolated in protest of the corruption of the government.<sup>52</sup>

After discovering this, it is difficult to find this economic argument to be credible. On the outside, Tunisia’s economy was relatively prosperous, and women had rights, which would support this economic argument on a shallow level. It seems that this argument makes sense and has factual support because women did have more rights in this economically more prosperous country. However, while the numbers looked great on the outside, Tunisia was experiencing incredible economic frustration, with a notably high rate of unemployment amongst educated young people. Coupled with the repressive nature of Ben Ali’s regime, the situation in Tunisia was desperate: “Economic frustration was compounded by political repression.”<sup>53</sup> While on the surface women had more rights,

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which coincided with Tunisia's relative economic stability, in reality, the period's conditions did not allow educated women to exercise their full potential. They were highly educated but lacked outlets in which they could leverage that education. As in Iran, a shiny exterior masked a large problem of discontent and dissent amongst the population. Through these cases, it is evident that the economic argument seems correct upon first glance, but crumbles under further scrutiny.

## PART V

The three arguments that I have examined through the cases of the Iranian and Jasmine Revolutions provide different answers to my central question: What factor is the most important determinant of a successful expansion of women's rights? Through my research, I have concluded that norms are the most important variable in the expansion of women's rights. As a reflection of a given society's collective attitudes and expectations, norms determine how willing a society is to adopt new ideas about gender parity. However, these norms and expectations must be a genuine reflection of public sentiment and not simply imposed on an unwilling population. Women's rights are expanded when a society believes in social justice and equality, as was the case in Tunisia. The economic argument is also convincing on a shallow level, but it fails to account for public discontent prior to both rev-

olutions. I have concluded that revolution that leads to regime change is not a significant cause of an expansion of women's rights, because it is entirely dependent upon the norms proliferated by the rising government.

This conclusion presents some challenges for policymakers because it shows that women's rights cannot simply be imposed on a society that does not support them. In societies where women's rights are not held in high regard, policymakers should try to implement change slowly so that the public has an opportunity to develop new ways of thinking over time. This will reduce public dissatisfaction and make the changes feel more in line with the state's cultural values and goals. An example of this technique is Saudi Arabia's decision to let women drive. The decision was reached last year, but is not being implemented until this June. The Saudi government allowed people time to adjust to this idea, which was radical to some, before it implemented the change fully. Through my research, additional questions about women's rights have been raised for me. Is female political representation an accurate measure of gender parity? Does having more female political leaders change people's views of women? Is this only a formality or does it carry real weight? In light of my observations, these are important questions to consider.



# ENDNOTES

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