Arab Reform Initiative

Bawader / Commentary, 7 April 2022

Youth perceptions of gender equality in Tunisia

Bedirhan Erdem Mutlu



Wala Kasmi (C-L), a 34-year-old CEO and Serial Digital Social Entrepreneur, talks to young people in Tunis, Tunisia, 13 January 2021. © EPA-EFE/MOHAMED MESSARA

Introduction

When the spark of Arab uprisings was lit in Tunisia, the country's youth were depicted as the "engine"[1] of change and the Tunisian Revolution was considered by some as "the youth revolution"[2] . Even though recent studies have challenged the "the myth of the youth revolution" ascribed to Arab uprisings, Tunisia still seems to be an outlier where the youth did constitute the bulk of the protesters.[3] On the other hand, scholars have long argued that at least in Western countries younger generations have been bringing a value change from "materialist" values emphasizing security, order, and economic well-being towards "post-materialist" values that emphasize self-expression, ideas, freedom, a more humane society.[4] Other studies have shown that post-materialist values are also taking hold among the younger generations in Muslim majority countries although materialist values remain more important across generations.[5] If we follow this reasoning, we could expect the Tunisian youth to be not only the frontrunners of the political revolution but also to be leading the way for a cultural transformation.[6]

So, is the Tunisian youth the precursor of change in values? To answer this question, I focus on youth perceptions of gender equality. That is because gender equality has been a hotly debated issue in post-revolutionary Tunisia and has been highlighted by some researchers as a key distinguishing component of post-materialist values in contemporary societies.[7] Compared to Muslim majority countries, Tunisia has one of the highest values in the gender equality perception index (which combines the responses to different questions on gender equality) and where the support for gender equality is even stronger among younger generations.[8] Another study on the matter shows that while some 30% of the older Tunisians rejects the statement that "Men make better political leaders than women", in the younger cohorts this figure reaches almost 50%.[9]

Yet, a closer examination of the concepts of gender equality and youth suggests that the above percentages and theories need to be re-evaluated and further nuanced. Previous works have highlighted the different dimensions of equality, and this multi-dimensionality is already being incorporated into policymaking. For

instance, a study by the European Institute for Gender Equality divides gender equality into different domains and indicates that whilst societies can progress with regard to gender equality in certain areas of life, they can stagnate or regress in other areas. [10] If we look at the Tunisian case from the multi-dimensional lens of gender equality, we see similar discrepancies. For instance, while the rejection rate of affirmations such as "Men make better political leaders" or "A university education is more important for boys" is much higher than other Muslim majority countries (45% and 80% respectively against 31% and 66% average of the other surveyed countries), the figures are much lower and closer to the average on some other questions such as "Men should have more of a right to a job" and "A wife must always obey her husband" (26% and 22% of rejection, respectively against 25.5% and 19% average of the other surveyed countries).[11] This divergence shows that while some dimensions of gender equality are relatively well accepted in Tunisian society, others are not.

The second shortcoming relates to the ambiguity surrounding the notion of youth. The boundaries and the characteristics of the concept are not universally defined, and different organizations provide different cutting points.[12] Within the MENA region, the term youth is colloquially used in a very malleable manner to include very large age groups. This can be attributed to the fact that young people often struggle to find employment and gain independence until a relatively late age.[13] Hence, this study considers youth as people aged 18 to 35. However, we also divide youth into two cohorts as those between 18 and 24 years of age and those between 25 and 35 of age. This separation not only allows us to consider the globally assumed distinctions between Generation Z and Generation Y, but it also distinguishes the revolutionary youth (those who were 17 or older when the revolution happened) from the post-revolution youth (those between 10 and 16 years old when the revolution happened) in Tunisia.

To present a more nuanced analysis, this paper uses a mixed method that combines quantitative analysis based on the Wave 5 of the Arab Barometer Survey[14] conducted from October to December 2018 in Tunisia and semi-structured interviews conducted by the author. with Tunisian civil society activists. In this way, we capture ordinary citizens' views as well as those of socio-political actors working on youth or gender activism.

Survey Findings

In the Arab Barometer survey, the sample of respondents is divided into four age groups: 18-24, 25-35, 36-55, and 65+ to see the variations between the youth and older generations as well as the variations within the two youth cohorts. To capture general attitudes towards gender equality, six questions asking the citizens about their level of agreement with certain statements that relate to gender relations in the society were identified. The answers to these questions indicate a large variance in the level of support for different domains of gender equality.[15] To better capture the effects of age groups on different dimensions of gender equality, two indexes are created by regrouping three questions related to the private sphere and three questions related to the public sphere. At first, two ordinary least squares (OLS) regression were run taking these indexes as dependent variables and they clearly showed that women were always more supportive of equality than men. Hence, I separated males from females by running two OLS models for each dependent variable. For all four models, I use an income scale (ranging from 1 to 12) and an education scale (ranging from 1 to 7) as numeric control variables.[16] Age groups are treated as a categorical variable and the middle-aged people (36-55) are taken as the base category for all models as this allows to see the generational differences between the middle-aged and the two youth cohorts as well as between the older people (56+) and the middle-aged.

The results suggest that middle-aged (36-55) women are significantly more supportive of gender equality in the public sphere than the older generations (56+) whereas the youngest cohort (18-24) is more supportive of equality than the middle-aged (Figure 1). On the other hand, there is no statistically significant difference between Generation Y (25-35) and the middle-aged showing that young women do not form a uniform category but are divided into two cohorts. If we look at men, the results are very different (Figure 2). There is no statistically significant difference between middle-aged, elderly, and Generation Z age groups. Yet, generation Y males are much less supportive of gender equality in the public sphere compared to the other generations.

Figure 1: Support for gender equality in public sphere among women

	Dependent variable:
	public_index
Income	0.056*
	(0.029)
Education	0.232***
	(0.041)
Age group 56+	-0.367**
	(0.149)
Age group 18-24	0.642***
	(0.221)
Age group 25-35	0.058
	(0.141)
Constant	-2.539***
	(0.157)
Observations	1,059
R2	0.089
Adjusted R2	0.084
Residual Std. Error	1.766 (df = 1053)
F Statistic	20.496*** (df = 5; 1053)
Note:	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Figure 2: Support for gender equality in public sphere among men

	Dependent variable:
	public_index
Income	0.056**
	(0.026)
Education	0.179***
	(0.044)
Age group 56+	0.185
	(0.159)
Age group 18-24	-0.090
	(0.169)
Age group 25-35	-0.596***
	(0.151)
Constant	-3.035***
	(0.179)
Observations	1,104
R2	0.044
Adjusted R2	0.040
Residual Std. Error	1.911 (df = 1098)
F Statistic	10.186*** (df = 5; 1098)
Note:	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

If we look at the private sphere, we see some change in the dynamics. Although middle-aged women are more supportive of equality in this domain compared to the older generations, we observe no statistically significant difference between them and either of the younger generations (Figure 3). This means that although

generation Z women are more likely to be more supportive of gender equality in the public domain compared to elder generations, we do not see a similar change in the private domain. With regards to men, the results are quite similar to the ones on the public sphere; there is no statistically significant difference between Gen Z, the middle-aged, and older men but generation Y is much less supportive of equality (Figure 4). As for the control variables, the level of education has a positive effect on support for gender equality for both spheres regardless of gender, but the degree of its impact is greater for the models on public sphere. The effect of income, on the other hand, is less clear. Its statistical significance varies from one model to another and its effect (i.e., the coefficient) is quite small even for the models where it is found to be statistically significant.

F

	Dependent variable:
	private_index
Income	0.011
	(0.025)
Education	0.091**
	(0.036)
Age group 56+	-0.278**
	(0.131)
Age group 18-24	0.166
	(0.193)
Age group 25-35	0.198
	(0.124)
Constant	2.522***
	(0.137)

Observations	1,056
R2	0.028
Adjusted R2	0.024
Residual Std. Error	1.546 (df = 1050)
F Statistic	6.115*** (df = 5; 1050)
Note:	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

	Dependent variable:
	private_index
Income	0.040*
	(0.022)
Education	0.108***
	(0.037)
Age group 56+	0.187
	(0.134)
Age group 18-24	-0.140
	(0.143)
Age group 25-35	-0.545***
	(0.128)
Constant	1.477***
	(0.151)

Observations	1,104
R2	0.036
Adjusted R2	0.031
Residual Std. Error	1.615 (df = 1098)
F Statistic	8.126*** (df = 5; 1098)
Note:	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Survey findings point out that the youth is not necessarily more supportive of gender equality. The youth is divided into cohorts and the gender of the respondent as well as the domain of gender equality we are looking at play a big role in their attitudes. The only case where we see the youth being more supportive of equality than older generations is the case of Generation Z females with regards to the public sphere. On the other hand, Generation Y males are less supportive of equality than the previous generation males in both public and private spheres. Generation Z males have more positive attitudes towards equality than Generation Y but no evidence suggests that they are more egalitarian than the middle-aged.

Beyond Statistics: Insights from the Civil Society

Since the Revolution, Tunisian society has witnessed a boom and transformation, including in feminist activism. A key characteristic of the new feminist sphere seems to be its rejuvenation. During my interviews, the relatively older feminist activists in decision-making positions of their organizations pointed out that most of the activists in their organizations are younger women, within the age bracket of 25 to 35. But there seems to be no clear link between the transformation of the feminist sphere and the public attitudes. Rejuvenation characterizes the associative sphere in post-revolutionary Tunisia and is not specific to feminist activism.[17] If we consider the decrease in egalitarian stances among Gen Y men and its stagnation among Gen Y women, the increased presence of young women in feminist associations can also be reflective of a growing discrepancy between

the activist youth and the general population.

Arab Barometer survey results also indicate a very striking finding; Generation Y males have lower levels of support with regards to both private and public domains when compared to Gen Z and middle-aged males. Evidence from qualitative interviews further confirms this finding. For instance, Marwan Abidi, the president of Tunisian National Youth Association (ONTJ), shared with me his impression that while younger men can accept women's participation in public life, they are still less supportive of equality with regards to employment and salaries.[18] According to a member of the feminist association Tounissiet, this approach is understandable because men reject equality when it means a direct infringement on their material interests. This interpretation echoes Inglehart's old hypothesis that post-materialist values only take hold when the conditions of material security and relative stability are achieved.[19] Hence, the persistence of social injustices and economic struggles can be a reason why support for gender equality is not growing among younger Tunisians. An indicator of the economic struggles is the unemployment rate that has reached 18% in the general population and 42% among those between the age of 15 and 24.[20] On the other hand, the survey results indicate a very small impact of income on attitudes towards gender equality, highlighting the limits of the security argument.

More importantly, women are suffering from economic hardships more than men as exemplified by the 24.1% unemployment rate among women compared to 15.9% among men.[21] Hence, material insecurity cannot constitute a basis to defy the struggle for gender equality as the economic insecurity hits women unequally. Nevertheless, we see that support for gender equality stagnates even among women from Generation Y whereas it only increases with regards to the public sphere for women in Generation Z. We also need to understand why not only young men but also young women (except in one instance) are not more supportive of gender equality. Arguably, this calls for more research into the multi-dimensionality of gender equality as well as the history and organization of the feminist sphere in Tunisia.

First of all, we observe a high support for more participation of women in the public sphere in Tunisia, a finding that is consistent across the survey results and my interviews with feminist activists. Yet, according to Sana Ben Achour, one of

the founding members of Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) and currently president of the Beity association, acceptance of women's participation in public life should not be exaggerated.[22] That is because, since independence, women have always been allowed to participate in public life in Tunisia, be it in the state/politics or educational institutions so that they would be the instruments of the state's political diffusion. Another feminist activist and journalist, Monia Ben Hamadi, concurs with Ben Achour that it is normal that gender equality is more accepted in the public sphere because decade long practices are more likely to be interiorized by the people.[23] In this reasoning, it is understandable that Tunisians support equality in schools and universities while simultaneously objecting to equality in divorce rights, household decisions, or inheritance.

Moreover, the feminist sphere's divisions with regard to equality in the private sphere might have had a role in this divergence. In fact, women's associations - ranging from the "universalist" feminists ATFD to more traditionalist Islamic referenced Tounissiet - seem to support more inclusion of women in politics.[24] Nevertheless, gender equality in the private sphere turns out to be much more problematic. This division is particularly exemplified on the issue of inheritance equality.[25] While universalist feminists like ATFD have been unequivocally supportive of equality in this matter, more traditionalist associations like Tounissiet have been more hesitant. A member of the latter association explained their position to me by saying they have been neither for nor against the proposal but that they believe it needs to be discussed by taking into consideration the realities on the ground for the Tunisian society and that its effects should be calculated.[26] Ben Hamadi, on the other hand, indicated that she is supportive of inheritance equality ideally but that she does not think it to be a priority for Tunisia today because it mostly concerns the upper classes of women who can have something to inherit.

It should also be noted that the stagnation of the unequal practices within the private sphere has historical roots that have been traced back to the codification of the personal status laws in Arab countries.[27] Furthermore, the matter of inheritance equality is also rather unique in today's Tunisia for its recent hyper-politicization by high-level political actors and literature suggests that it can even be treated as an electoral cleavage among Tunisians.[28] Political differentiations on

this matter previously contributed to the breakdown of coalitions of different feminist organizations in Tunisia.[29] Hence, the attitudes towards inheritance equality can also be stemming from historical roots and the concept's politically dividing nature.

Moving Forward

So, what can be done about the persistence of the inegalitarian gender norms among the Tunisian youth? Our findings show that there is a need to distinguish feminist activists from the general public. It is important first to consider different sub-groups of youth (e.g. Gen Z vs. Gen Y, male vs. female, etc.) and the different dimensions of gender equality (private vs. public) to accurately identify what norms are persistent within which specific group. We have found that gender equality is much less accepted within the private sphere than the public sphere across all generations. Furthermore, Generation Y males are particularly more inegalitarian in their overall approach than the previous generation. This is important to consider because different reasons can be behind the persistence of inegalitarian norms with regard to different topics.

As inequality persists in a fragmented fashion, it can also be fought in a piecemeal manner. Women have been participating in public life since independence and even more so since the 2011 Revolution. State-led feminism failed to provide overarching equality, and political change does not seem to be leading to a value change, especially with regard to the private sphere. This is why the feminist movement in Tunisia can benefit from focusing more on social change in the private sphere beyond political or public affairs. According to Ben Achour, younger generations of feminists have been more focused on social change in the private domain without necessarily referring to the state or the laws. This generational change in the modes of activism can potentially bring a value transformation towards more equality in the future, especially among young women.

While younger generations of women can be much more favourable to the question of equality, a reactionary stance seems to be present among younger males. The increased economic hardships in Tunisia likely present a big obstacle in the way of gender equality and improving the overall socio-economic conditions

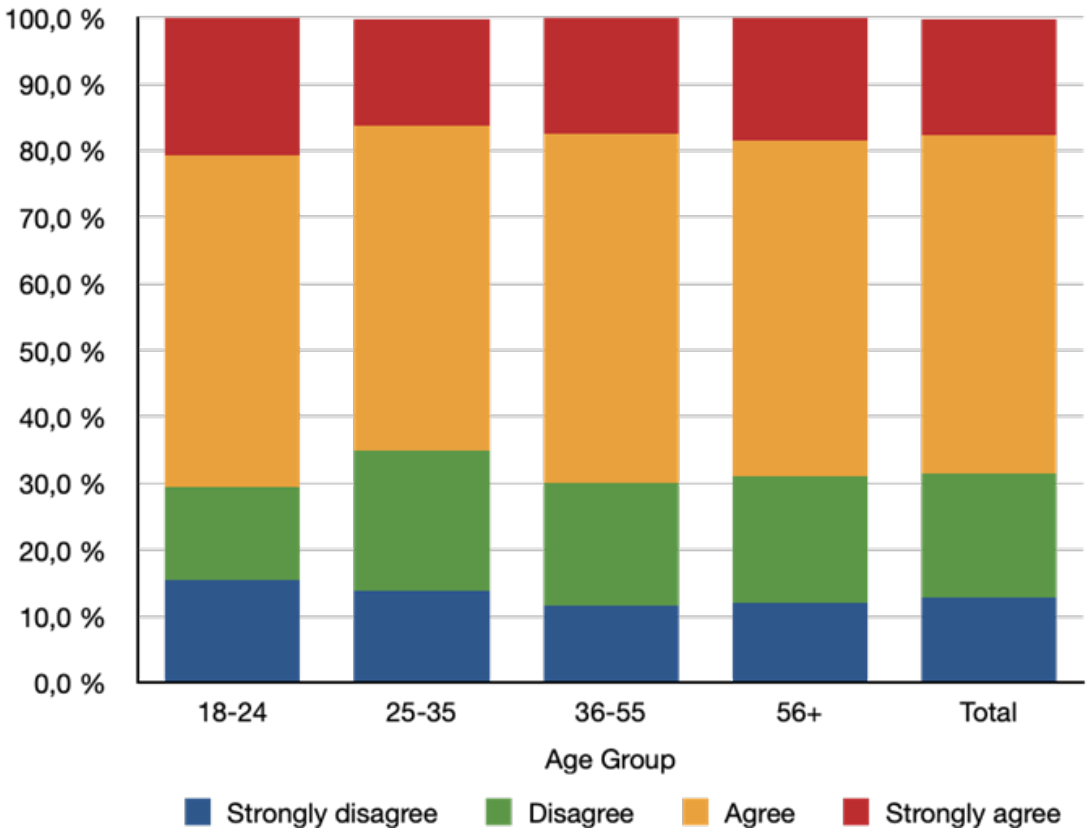
can help overcome the reactionary stance. In the meantime, a strategy that specifically targets younger men (particularly Generation Y) can be even more beneficial in this regard. This can be done through education, which is shown to be more important than income in increasing support for gender equality, advocacy and sensibilization campaigns

Lastly, the framing of the demands for gender equality needs to be carefully considered to avoid calls being divisive. For instance, the call for inheritance equality seems to have done more harm than good by dividing the women's associations across political cleavages without making any progress in swaying the views of Tunisian society at large towards a more acceptance of inheritance equality. A way to avoid such a scenario in the future can be creating a common agreed upon framework that allows for women's associations with different ideological underpinnings to converse together and cooperate. This can be achieved by a focusing on issues where an overall agreement exists rather than pushing the debate towards divisive objectives.

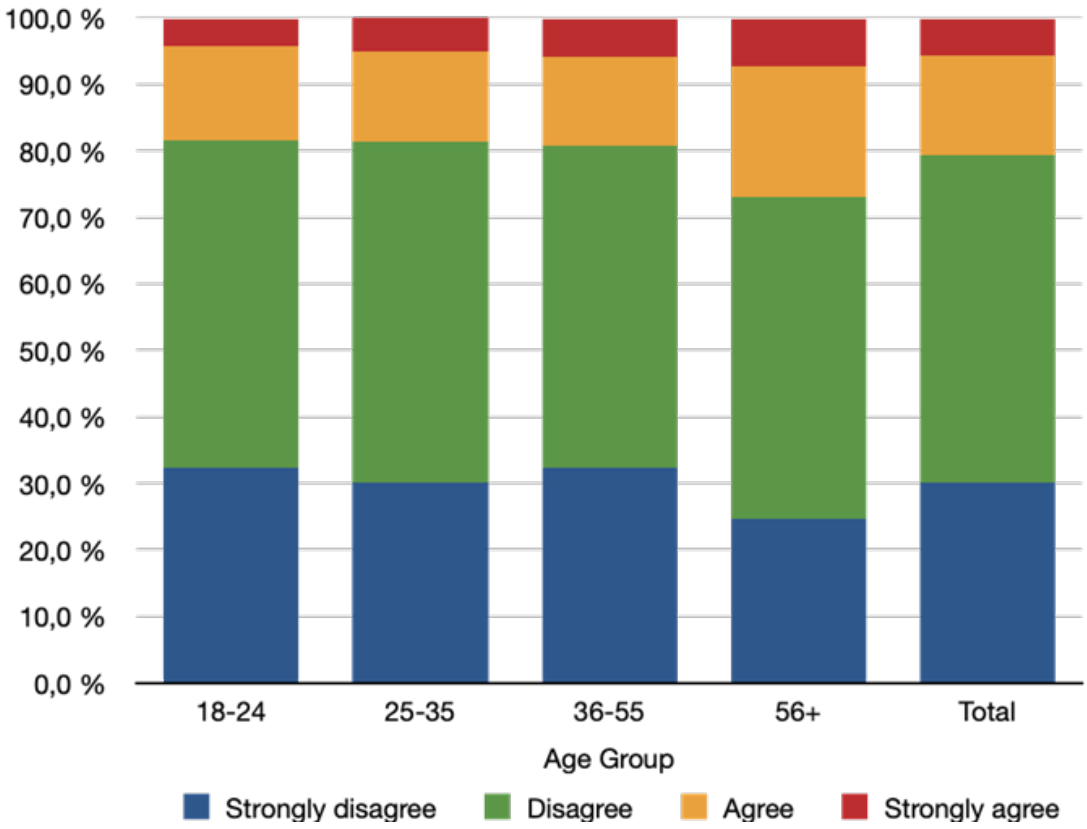
Annex

The below graphs show descriptive statistics regarding support for different affirmations related to gender equality across age groups based on the Arab Barometer Survey. The first three questions were used to create the public sphere index while the last three were used to create the private sphere.

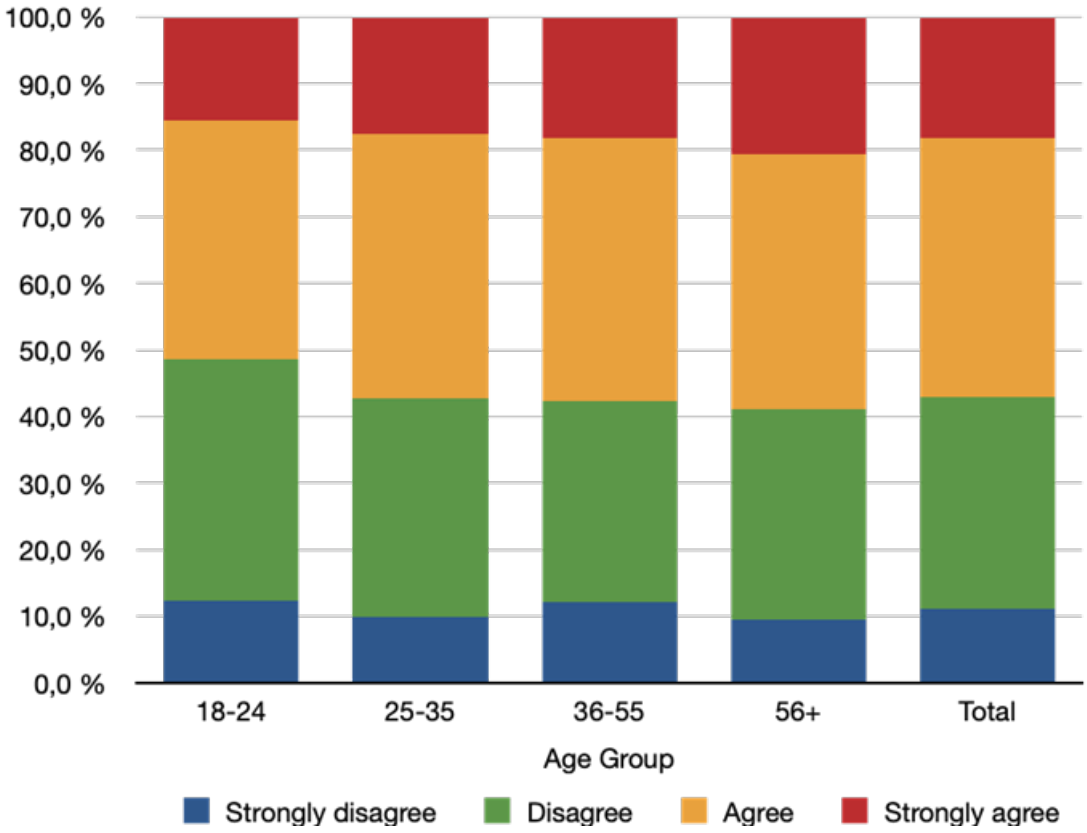
Graph 1: A woman can become President or Prime Minister of a Muslim country.

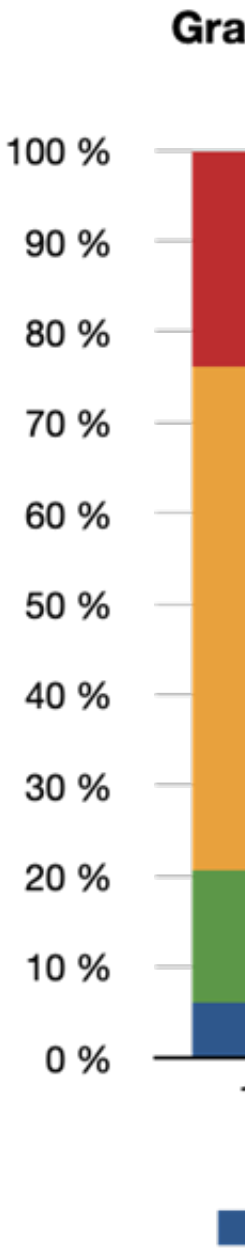


Graph 2: University education for males is more important than university education for females.

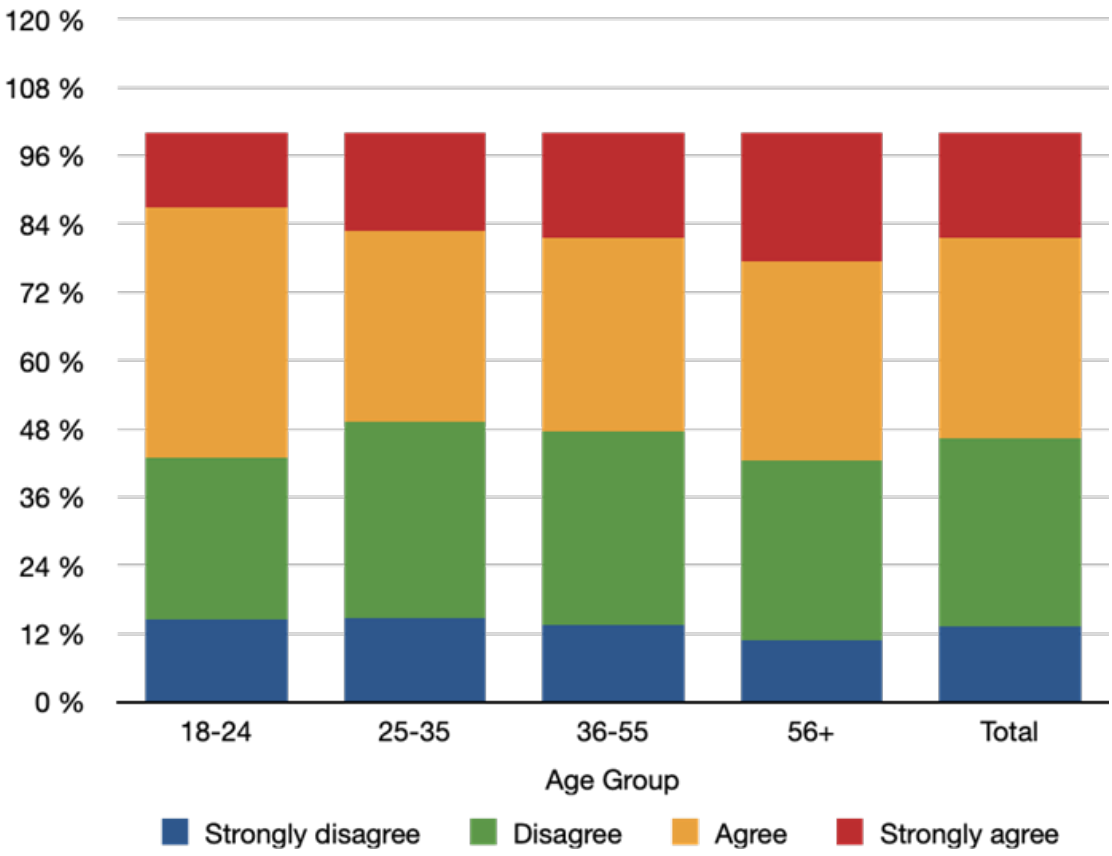


Graph 3: In general, men are better at political leadership than women.

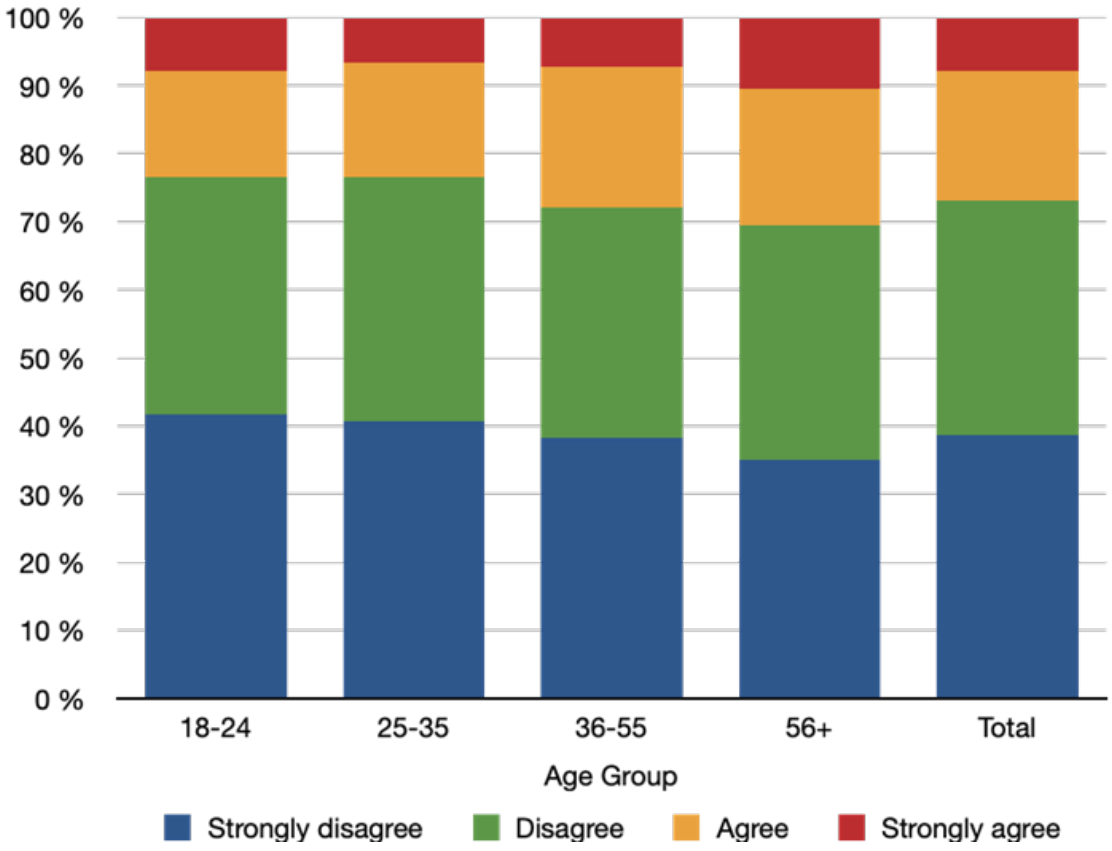



Gra
100 %
90 %
80 %
70 %
60 %
50 %
40 %
30 %
20 %
10 %
0 %

Graph 5: Husbands should have final say in all decisions concerning the family.



Graph 6: Women's inheritance / share of inheritance should be equal to that of men



Endnotes

1. Nicholas Collins, “Voices of a Revolution: Conversations with Tunisia’s Youth” (Tunis: National Democratic Institute, 2011), https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadu912.pdf.

2. Christopher Dickey, “Tunisia Riots: The Youth Revolution,” *Newsweek*, January 14, 2011, sec. World, https://www.newsweek.com/tunisia-riots-youth-revolution-67095.

3. Pamela Abbott, Andrea Teti, and Roger John Sapsford, “The Myth of the Youth Revolution: The Role of Young People in the 2011 Arab Uprisings,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2017, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3085160.

4. Ronald F. Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1997).

5. Ronald F. Inglehart, “Changing Values in the Islamic World and the West: Social Tolerance and the Arab Spring,” in *Values, Political Action, and Change in the Middle East and the Arab Spring*, ed. Moaddel Mansoor and Gelfand Michele J. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3–24.

6. Scholars have previously combined these two elements, see, for instance Cole, Juan Ricardo, *The New Arabs: How the Millennial Generation Is Changing the Middle East* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

7. Inglehart, “Changing Values in the Islamic World and the West”.

8. Mansoor Moaddel and Julie De Jong, “Youth Perceptions and Values During the Arab Spring: Cross-National Variation and Trends,” in *Values, Political Action, and Change in the Middle East and the Arab Spring*, ed. Mansoor Moaddel and Michele J. Gelfand (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25–57.

9. Abbott, Teti, and Sapsford, "The Myth of the Youth Revolution", 22.

10. “Gender Equality Index 2017: Measuring Gender Equality in the European Union 2005-2015.” (LU: European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017), https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2839/707843.

11. Moaddel and De Jong, "Youth Perceptions and Values During the Arab Spring", 38.

12. “Definition of Youth,” Fact Sheet (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)., n.d.), https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf.

13. Fethi Mansouri, “Youth and Political Engagement in Post-Revolution Tunisia,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, May 15, 2020, 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2020.1765142.

14. “Arab Barometer Wave V,” Dataset, 2019, https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/arab-barometer-wave-v/.

15. The descriptive graphs summarizing the answers given to the questions by age group are included in the annex.

16. In the Arab Barometer Survey, income is grouped as twelve ordered intervals and education is grouped as seven levels from 1= No formal education to 7 = MA degree and above. I treat the ordered income intervals and education levels as numeric scales for the simplicity of analysis whereas they are in reality ordinary variables.

17. Desrues, Thierry, and Ana Velasco Arranz. “Associations and Young People during the Tunisian Transition: Pluralism, Socialisation, and Democratic Legitimation?” *The Journal of North African Studies* 26, no. 2 (March 4, 2021): 251–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2019.1665286.

18. Author’s interview

19. Ronald F. Inglehart, “The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-Industrial Societies” *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 4 (December 1971): 991–1017. https://doi.org/10.2307/1953494.

20. “Indicateurs de l’emploi et Du Chômage, Troisième Trimestre 2021,” (Tunis: Institut National des Statistiques, November 2021). http://www.ins.tn/publication/indicateurs-de-lemploi-et-du-chomage-troisieme-trimestre-2021.

21. “Indicateurs de l’emploi et Du Chômage, Troisième Trimestre 2021."

22. Author’s interview

23. Author’s interview

24. Maro Youssef, “Unlikely Feminist Coalitions: Islamist and Secularist Women’s Organizing in Tunisia,” *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, October 11, 2021, jxab020, https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab020.

25. Youssef, “Unlikely Feminist Coalitions.”

26. Author’s interview

27. Tobich, Faïza. *Les Statuts Personnels Dans Les Pays Arabes : De l’éclatement à l’harmonisation* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires d’Aix-Marseille, 2015). http://books.openedition.org/puam/1005.

28. Salih Yasun, “Attitudes on Family Law as an Electoral Cleavage: Survey Evidence from Tunisia,” *Middle East Law and Governance* 12, no. 2 (August 29, 2020): 131–66, https://doi.org/10.1163/18763375-01202003.

29. Youssef, “Unlikely Feminist Coalitions.”

Arab Reform Initiative

About the author



Bedirhan Erdem Mutlu

Bedirhan has a Master's degree in political science from Sciences Po Paris specializing in comparative politics. He also holds a Bachelor's in political science from the same institution with a regional concentration on the MENA region. His research looks at the intersection of religion, politics, and democratization in the MENA with a particular focus on Tunisia. He occasionally writes opinion pieces for Turkish news outlets.

About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

arab-reform.net

contact@arab-reform.net

© 2022 by the Arab Reform Initiative.
To view a copy of this licence, click here