

Session 3

Women's Participation in Public Life

OBJECTIVES:

- To discuss what rights and freedoms relate to public life and protect women's participation in the public sphere.
- To consider what are the rights of citizens and what are the responsibilities.
- To consider how women's equal participation in public life and citizenship impacts society as whole.
- To examine the traditional notion of gender roles as being complementary to one another, and the threat to women's participation in public life when that complementarity is codified in law.

In This Session:

Equality between the sexes frequently conflicts with traditional ideas about public and private life. Different cultures draw the line between the public sphere (government, commerce, education, health, the arts) and the private sphere (home, family, personal relationships) differently. However, in nearly every society throughout history, the public sphere was overwhelming considered the domain of men, and the private sphere the domain of women. Where men made decisions about business and politics, education, and so on, women occupied (even if they did not control) the private sphere through maintaining households and bearing and raising children. Women's power – the right and ability to make decisions – in the private sphere depended, and continues to depend, on social, economic, and cultural factors. By contrast, men have presided over public institutions and private family matters since time immemorial.

In this session, we will discuss whether women and men can have the same rights in society where there is still a sharp divide between gender roles in public and private life. We will challenge the argument that gender roles are necessary complements to each other. We will consider whether equal dignity between men and women is the same as equal rights, and why the distinction between equal dignity and equal rights matters. In particular, we will look at the responsibilities of citizenship and the rights that are integral to women's ability to fulfill their role as citizens in the public sphere.

In this session, we will review some of the language from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) – a binding legal treaty that protects women’s and men’s equal right to participate in public life.¹⁴ We will discuss how men and women can contribute equally as citizens and whether women can do this if their role is to be complementary to men. We will read about an early draft of the new Tunisian Constitution that sought to codify women’s complementary role and which met with swift and strong resistance from women’s rights and human rights advocates. We will discuss why the language in the draft constitution was fiercely opposed, and what Tunisian society gained by its removal.

Reading Assignment:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹⁵

Excerpts

Article 13

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State.
2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 21

1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
2. Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 23

1. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
2. Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
3. Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.

¹⁴ Almost all countries have ratified the CEDAW agreement – 187 out of 194 countries have ratified. Only seven have not ratified, including the United States, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Iran, and the Pacific Island nations of Palau and Tonga. <http://www.womenstreaty.org/index.php/about-cedaw/faq>. A fuller discussion about the ratification of CEDAW, and how and why many countries have made reservations to specific articles in CEDAW, follows in Session 12.

¹⁵ For the full text of the UDHR, see Appendix A.

4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 26

1. Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27

1. Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.
2. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Group Exercise:

The UDHR sets out to enumerate the rights of men and women to participate in public life. For this exercise, ask the group to read through each of the UDHR Articles listed above and brainstorm what activities relating to public life, from publishing a political article to meeting a friend of the opposite sex in a public place, are protected as rights by the Declaration.

For example, in Article 13, the UDHR establishes that individuals have the right to freedom of movement. This means that adult women have the right to travel without needing the permission from a male relative and that women and men have the equal rights to travel and move about in the public sphere. How does this right enable women's activities in the public sphere? Which activities?

As the group goes through the list, ask a volunteer to record on a board or large sheet of paper the rights and activities being discussed in the workshop session.

Reading Assignment:

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women¹⁶(CEDAW)

Excerpts

Article 7

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- a. To vote in all elections...
- b. To participate in the formulation of government policy. . . and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- c. To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

Article 8

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations.

Team Exercise:

Articles 7 and 8 of CEDAW (excerpted above) guarantee some equal rights of citizenship for women and men. There are responsibilities of citizenship of course, which include abiding laws, conducting oneself in a manner that ensures your own and others' safety, educating oneself about social and political issues, helping others less fortunate, participating in charitable organizations, participating in public forums and referendums, and serving on a jury. The actions one takes to be a good citizen are almost all conducted in the public sphere, although most of these actions at one time or another were considered appropriate, or even legal, only for men.

Together as a group, brainstorm all of the actions and activities of a good citizen in your community. No action is too insignificant (for example, cleaning the sidewalk in front of your house, or following traffic rules...) Create a list on the board of 20 to 30 steps to being a good citizen.

When the list is complete, starting from the top, review with the group whether the activity or action is conducted in the public (PC) or private sphere (PT), which you can note by writing PC or PT next to the item. Also ask the group whether the activity or action has historically been done by men (M), women (W), or both (MW), noting an M, W, or MW next to the item.

When you have completed the list, discuss the group's findings.

¹⁶ For the full text of CEDAW, see Appendix D.

Questions for Group Discussion:

- The UDHR and CEDAW both claim that men and women are equal in dignity, freedom, and rights. Do you believe that rights and responsibilities of citizenship should be the same for men and women? Why or why not?
- What do you think are the most important responsibilities of citizens, and why?
- What is the connection between a woman's participation in public life and a woman's ability to fully participate as a citizen? Can a woman exercise her full right to citizenship without having the same freedoms as men in the public sphere?
- Has women's increasing participation in public life changed society over the last decade, century, and millennium? If so, how?
- In what aspects of public life and citizenship would you like to see women's participation increase? What is the impact you hope will be accomplished by women's increased participation in the public sphere?

Reading Assignments:

Article 28 of the Draft Constitution of Tunisia

In August 2012, a draft of a new constitution in Tunisia was released to the public. Article 28 of the draft constitution characterized women's role as being "complementary" to men.¹⁷ The response by women's rights advocates was swift and forceful. Their criticism was that defining women as being complementary to men reduced women's status and worth to that of being a wife, daughter, or mother – in relationship to a specific man or men. Women could never be *equal* to men if their status was dependent on their being complementary to men. In later drafts of the constitution, the controversial language was removed.

Group Exercise:

Imagine a world where men's value to society was determined by the degree to which they complemented the rights, roles, and responsibilities of women. What would this mean for women? What would this mean for husbands and fathers? What would this mean for religious leaders? What would this mean for politicians? How would men's responsibilities change? How would their responsibilities stay the same?

Ask the group to break into pairs, and assign each pair a different male char-

17 "Although multiple translations may be offered on the meaning of "*yetekaamul*," the Arabic term in contention, the term "complementary" (or "*complémentaires*" in French) has been the most frequent translation." From "The Arab Spring and Women's Rights in Tunisia," by Mounira M. Charrad and Amina Zarrugh, Sept. 4, 2013 in E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS. <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/09/04/the-arab-spring-and-womens-rights-in-tunisia/>

acter: Religious Leader, Member of Parliament, Doctor, Grocer, High School Teacher, Car Mechanic, etc.

Ask each pair to prepare a short (one paragraph) manifesto for their male character explaining how his public and private roles are complementary to women and how they thus promote the welfare of all of society. The manifestos should be written in the first person. An example of how one might begin is: *"I, Ibrahim, professor of biology at the university, have rights and responsibilities that are complementary to those of women. These include my role as teacher where I educate both young men and women and support and complement women faculty at my university..."*

When the pairs reconvene, ask a volunteer from each pair to read their manifesto.

Questions for Group Discussion:

- Was this an easy or difficult exercise? Why?
- What does "complementary" mean to you in the context of gender roles?
- Why did the Tunisian women's rights activists believe that you cannot have equality between the sexes where legally one sex is supposed to complement the other?
- Do you think that critics of Tunisia's Article 28 would have been satisfied if the language in the article said that women were complementary to men, *AND* that men were complementary to women? Why or why not?
- What do women have to offer society as doctors, teachers, bankers, aid workers, grocers, religious authorities, journalists, politicians, diplomats, and peacekeepers? Are their contributions in these roles limited to how they complement men? Why or why not?