

Women's Role in the Tunisian Process of Democratisation

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The significant role of women in all fields of the Tunisian society has been decisive since the country's struggle for independence from the colonial power, France, and during the state-building process of the post-colonial period. Furthermore, the events of and after the Arab Spring brought about a more active role for women's rights activists, which resulted in a widespread debate on gender equality. However, despite the efforts of the Tunisian Government to ensure protection against the discrimination of women, the growing socioeconomic crisis, amplified by the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, brought to the surface the difficulties of vulnerable groups, including women. Women engaged in rural activities were more at risk of facing deteriorating circumstances. In this context, the current study examines the relationship between the process of democratisation and the role women can play in the shaping of the political field and vice versa.

In addition to applying statistical indicators, the article verifies the main theses of the research in the empirical part due to the incorporation of qualitative data collected from interviews conducted with five representatives/activists of local Tunisian NGOs.

Although international relations themselves remain strongly gendered, the mobilisation of women's rights activists can contribute to overwriting traditional masculine and feminine roles in public versus private spheres, and thus can result in a more gender-friendly environment.

Keywords: *democratisation, women's rights NGOs, gender equality, Tunisia, mobilisation, socioeconomic challenges, awareness campaign, public and private spheres*

Introduction

Tunisia occupies a special place among the MENA countries² concerning gender equality because of the outstanding indicators and achievements that also make the country often

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regarded a pioneer in women's rights. To better understand the current discourse on women's rights, it is indispensable to evoke the major milestones from the independence of the country gained in 1956 that established a solid framework for gender equality. However, taking into account the limitations of the scope of the article, the time frame focuses on the post-Arab Spring period of Tunisia, which is also in accordance with the findings of the empirical research.

In order to better understand the evolution of women's rights in Tunisia, it must be highlighted that the modern history of the country starting from its independence is understood along the religious versus secular fault line, or the modern versus Islamist dichotomy. The Islamist side, led by the Ennahda party (previously known as Islamic Tendency Movement) at its head advocated the traditional roles of Islam and opposed the Western-type feminism in its founding years, mainly in the field of education and the question of polygamy.³ Concerning the place of women in the Muslim society, it cannot be neglected that they are generally pictured as being vulnerable and weak whereas strength is attributed to men. As a consequence, women and men have different roles; men are regarded as breadwinners and guardians of women, while wives and mothers are responsible for household activities. This traditional division of tasks also means that in most cases men have the right to make the final decision.⁴ The emphasis of traditional values is quite understandable and is seen as a counteract and a revival movement in light of the memories of the colonial period and the enforcement of Western values following the independence of Tunisia.

Contrary to the religious aspect, the modernist approach was dominant during the decolonisation and in the state-building process and served to set the country on the Western model of development. The establishment of state institutions, e.g. the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Seniors focusing on the position of women in the society is also understood in the context of state modernisation and the outstanding role women were given by the first president of the country, Habib Bourguiba.

Following the independence of Tunisia, poor indicators of human development⁵ also showed that a greater emphasis on development was inevitable. The most significant measure of President Bourguiba, was the adoption of the *Personal Status Code* (CSP)⁶ in 1956 that abolished polygamy, provided women with the right to divorce and child custody, and set a minimum age for marriage.⁷ In 1958, Bourguiba introduced compulsory education for young women and people living in rural areas.⁸ However, despite the visibly progressive measures, the CSP did not succeed in eliminating gender inequalities in the family since women continued to inherit half of the men's inheritance,

³ Fatemeh Radan: 2011 Uprising and Tunisian Women's Socio-Political Situation. *The Quarterly Journal of Political Studies of Islamic World*, 6, no. 24 (2018). 22–31.

⁴ Muhammad Zafrulla Khan: *Women in Islam*. Islamabad, Islam International Publications Limited, 1991. 8, 11.

⁵ In 1956 the literacy rate only reached 15% and only one child in thirty received a high-school education (Mark A. Tessler – Mary E. Keppel: Political Generations. In Russell A. Stone – John Simmons: *Change in Tunisia. Studies in the Social Sciences*. Albany, State University of New York Press, 1976. 73–106).

⁶ Personal Status Code referred to as CSP in the following from the French acronym of Code du Statut Personnel.

⁷ République Tunisienne [Republic of Tunisia]: Code du Statut Personnel [Personal Status Code]. L'Imprimerie Officielle de la République Tunisienne [Official Printing Press of the Republic of Tunisia], 2012.

⁸ Ahmed Chabchoub: *Bourguiba et moi* [Bourguiba and Me]. Dubai, Al Manhal, 2014. 128.

men received greater rights to the guardianship of children, and women were required to obey their husband.⁹ The promotion of the image of modern Tunisia, that is, state-controlled feminism, also determined the country's approach to the question of gender equality following the coming to power of President Ben Ali in 1987.¹⁰ However, besides restrictions in freedom of expression, the economic marginalisation of women also remained significant during Ben Ali, since women only received three-quarters of the salary of men, though with the prospect of full retirement.¹¹ It was in this context that the feminist discourse intensified in the 1980s and 1990s, which is also considered the second wave of feminism in Tunisia. Due to the activism of women's rights NGOs, Tunisian women married to foreign nationals could pass their citizenship on to their children for the first time in the country's history¹² and in 2002 the citizenship law was amended.¹³

Following decades of repression of freedom of association and of expression, the post-Arab Spring era opened the way for women's rights organisations to freely embrace previously marginalised topics, including the launch of a broad discourse on equal inheritance¹⁴ and recently the growing cases of domestic violence that culminated during the Covid-19 pandemic. With regard to the MENA region in general, it must be outlined, that while there was a wide attention on women's political mobilisation during the Arab Spring which at the same time opened some political space for women, it did not automatically grant gender equality. Stephan and Charrad argued that the events of the Arab Spring led to the destruction of Western stereotypes of Muslim women, which often depicted them as subordinated and living in a patriarchal society; however, the road to democratisation and the introduction of significant political and socioeconomic measures are still far away.¹⁵ Despite the initial hopes, women remain victims of the rise of violence and oppression. Khalil also underlined that the Arab Spring must be understood in the paradox of visible reforms and the existence of violence against women as well as the modernisation efforts of the young generation and the remnants of the patriarchal society.¹⁶

Despite the emerging security threat and the growing socioeconomic tensions, up until the 2021 categorisation of Freedom House, Tunisia was often cited as the success

⁹ Mounira Charrad: *Good Practices in Family Policy Making: Family Policy Development, Monitoring and Implementation: Lessons Learnt*. Report for the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Division for Social Policy and Development, Expert Group Meeting, 2012. 5.

¹⁰ Moha Ennaji: Women's Activism in North Africa: A Historical and Socio-Political Approach. In Hanane Darhour – Drude Dahlerup (eds.): *Double-Edged Politics on Women's Rights in the MENA Region*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 158–178.

¹¹ Khadija Arfaoui: Women and Leadership in the Post-Arab Spring? The Case of Tunisia. In Fatima Sadiqi (ed.): *Women's Movements in Post-“Arab Spring” North Africa*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 223–235.

¹² Charrad (2012): op. cit. 5.

¹³ Ennaji (2020): op. cit. 158–178.

¹⁴ It must be noted that the question of equal inheritance is contradictory to the Islamic law where the system of inheritance is strictly regulated, but a woman of any degree of kinship may inherit only half of the inheritance of a man of the same degree (Asaf Ali Asghar Fyze: *Outlines of Muhammadan Law*. London, Oxford University Press, 1964. 380–432).

¹⁵ Rita Stephan – Mounira M. Charrad: Introduction: Advancing Women's Rights in the Arab World. In *Women Rising. In and Beyond the Arab Spring*. New York, New York University Press, 2020. 1–11.

¹⁶ Andrea Khalil: Introduction: Gender Paradoxes of the Arab Spring. In *Gender, Women and the Arab Spring*. Oxon, Routledge, 2015. 1–6.

story of the Arab Spring regarding democratisation. However, according to the theory of Comparative Political Science it is quite usual that young democracies return to authoritarian tendencies. Taking into account the current processes, Gallien and Werenfels talked about a hybrid democracy and regarded the consolidation of authoritarian practices and the deficiencies of the old regime the biggest constraints to the preservation of the country's previous achievements.¹⁷

The article extends most of the previous literature that did not involve a feminist approach and applied a fairly narrow, elitist understanding of democracy, such as Huntington, who associated democratic values with the Western Christian cultural space as well as with economic development.¹⁸ The article mainly builds on Ann Tickner's gendered perceptions in IR¹⁹ and states that the question of women's rights requires a complex analysis in which all circumstances and key players, including decision-makers and sub-state actors of the political arena, must be taken into account. The public and private sphere dichotomy of Ann Tickner is analysed with the findings of Georgina Waylen²⁰ who also highlighted the complexity of women's political participation and underlined that political institutions, social and economic conditions, and the main objectives of the actual leadership must be examined simultaneously. The article focuses on the question of *what impact women can have on the process of democratisation* and *whether democratisation can bring about a more gender-friendly environment*. The research uses the ratings of the Freedom House between 2010 and 2022 based on different criteria of political rights and civil liberties to be compared on an annual basis in Tunisia²¹ when defining the democratic transition in the country. The conduct of interviews with eight representatives/activists of Tunisian NGOs contributes to strengthening the main statement, namely that the mobilisation of women's rights NGOs can play an important role in overwriting the traditional division between public and private spheres (masculine vs. feminine roles). However, considering the complexity of the research topic, the impact socioeconomic circumstances have on the evolution of women's rights and the transition to democracy cannot be neglected either.

The shaping of political processes in the world of gendered IR

The theoretical part considers gender inequalities as a basis for understanding and evaluating whether greater inclusion of women in politics can contribute to democratisation. Scholars themselves are divided on the outcome of women's political participation and according to certain experts of the topic, the presence of women in politics is more symbolic. On the one hand, certain representatives of women's rights NGOs saw the nomination of the first

¹⁷ Max Gallien – Isabelle Werenfels: Is Tunisia Really Democratising? Progress, Resistance, and an Uncertain Outlook. *German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)*, no. 13 (2019). 1–2, 5, 7.

¹⁸ Samuel P. Huntington: Democracy's Third Wave. *Journal of Democracy*, 2, no. 2 (1991). 12–34.

¹⁹ Ann J. Tickner: *Gender in International Relations. Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1992.

²⁰ Georgina Waylen: Women and Democratization: Conceptualizing Gender Relations in Transition Politics. *World Politics*, 46, no. 3 (1994). 327–354.

²¹ Freedom House: *Freedom in the World Research Methodology*. s. a.

woman Prime Minister in Tunisia and in the Arab world, Najla Bouden on 30 September,²² as a unique step from the point of gender equality. On the other hand, regarding from the point of view of the comparative politics of gender (CPG) elaborated by Waylen, institutional practices contribute to reinforcing gender equality. Therefore, the nomination of the PM does not obviously bring about a significant result, but is more like a strategic decision to shed light on the importance of feminist issues.²³ Referring to Moghadam, it is more like a clear strategy and the political establishment of the country that define the success of democratisation and the way the question of gender equality is treated,²⁴ thus the outcome of the prime ministership of PM Bouden will be seen in the long-run. While a homogeneous country with a Western orientated elite would be supposed to contribute to the success of democratisation, the events of the Arab Spring demonstrated the opposite. Here, the socioeconomic and political indicators and the situation of civil and political rights will have importance again and will be mentioned later when measuring the process of democratisation.

As mentioned above, the post-Arab Spring era was considered a new élan for women's rights activists to uphold the question of gender equality and give a new impetus to the transition period. However, economic development also plays a crucial role in triggering cultural changes by fostering a transition to democracy, although this process is unimaginable without real political will.²⁵

Ann Tickner considered international relations male-dominated, also called deeply 'gendered'. According to her, the elimination of gender hierarchies requires more equal, approximately 50% of participation of women in all levels of decision-making, including foreign and military policy-making.²⁶ Joan Scott also shed light on the fact that gender relations are, in fact, power relations that derive from the traditional division of roles between the sexes (*private* versus *public* sphere), further strengthening women's inferior status in the political arena.²⁷ Related to the *private* versus *public sphere* dichotomy, Tickner emphasised that military and foreign policy making are those fields that have always been attributed to men, since they traditionally represent *patriotism*, *strength*, *power*, *autonomy*, and *rationalism* compared with the female features of *naivety* and *weakness*. She also mentioned *force*, *violence*, or *defence* among traditional masculine characteristics.²⁸

The question that emerges is whether the aforementioned socially constructed division of gender roles can be overwritten and women could infiltrate the public sphere. Such a change would mean a more significant role in decision-making for women where their interests are also taken into account. In this regard, Randall applied a bidirectional

²² Aude Mazoue: Le drôle de nomination de Najla Bouden à la tête du gouvernement tunisien. *France 24*, 01 October 2021.

²³ Georgina Waylen: *Engendering Transitions. Women's Mobilization, Institutions, and Gender Outcomes*. Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2007. 6–7.

²⁴ Valentine M. Moghadam: Modernising Women and Democratisation after the Arab Spring. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19, no. 2 (2014). 139, 141.

²⁵ Huntington (1991): op. cit. 30–34.

²⁶ Tickner (1992): op. cit. 8–9, 96.

²⁷ Joan W. Scott: Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis. *The American Historical Review*, 91, no. 5 (1986). 1069.

²⁸ Tickner (1992): op. cit. 8–9, 24, 38, 96.

approach from the perspective of policy making and women and analysed whether gender equality is a prerequisite to democracy for real and it proposes a more gender friendly environment. By evoking some practices and experiences around the world, Randall dealt with the analysis of the correlation between the improvement of women's political participation (percentage of women in national parliaments) and a more active role in the promotion of gender issues. Although she acknowledged the relatively low participation of women in national parliaments around the world, arguments and previous practices also shed light on the advantages and disadvantages of the introduction of a quota system in the context of political realities. The main concepts of women's attributions (e.g. peacemakers) must be examined in the specific political, social or historical circumstances of a given country. During such an examination, it must also be taken into account whether a greater interest in women issues serves to play the so-called gender card and female politicians sitting in parliament only represent a narrow scope of women, or women's interest also includes the need of lower classes.²⁹

According to Moghadam, the institutional legacy of the past, the role of women's rights organisations before and after the transition and the political establishment of a country have a crucial impact on the question of women's rights. In this regard, she refers to the main findings of previous studies in the field of women and democracy (e.g. Steven Fish, Eva R. Bellin) and argues that one of the main obstacles in front of achieving gender equality in the MENA lies in the repressive political culture of these countries.³⁰

Socioeconomic and political panorama of women's rights

On the one hand, as has been mentioned, state feminism in Tunisia enabled the implementation of significant reforms. However, on the other hand, the need of these reforms are clearly understood along the religious-secular and conservative-modernist fault lines explained in the introduction, the latter one of which aimed at exploiting a more educated and skilled labour force which conformed to the Western-type modernisation process. As a consequence of state modernisation, indicators in the field of education demonstrated a significant improvement for women, meaning that the average year spent in school increased from 4.9 to 15.1 years between 1971 and 2010.³¹ Family planning in the 1960s and the legalisation of abortion in 1973³² also conformed to the modernisation process of Bourguiba. However, despite Tunisia's significant achievements in women's empowerment and the more intense inclusion of women in the shaping of the question of gender equality after the Arab Spring (e.g. the drafting of the new constitution in 2014, the open debate on the controversial law on equal inheritance), these measures did not produce concrete results in all domains. Again, it is to be emphasised that while women getting

²⁹ Vicky Randall: *Gender and Democracy*. Institute for Democracy and Conflict Resolution, 2011. 7–10.

³⁰ Moghadam (2014): op. cit. 139, 141.

³¹ Erica Mail: Women's Rights in Tunisia Before and After the 2011 Revolution: Progress When It Helps the People in Power. *International Immersion Program Papers* (2019). 2–4.

³² Augustin Jomier: Secularism and State Feminism: Tunisia's Smoke and Mirrors. *Books and Ideas*, 28 November 2011. 6.

only half of the inheritance than men is based on Islamic principles, receiving a three quarters salary is purely a public administration-related issue.

Taking the latest Gender Inequality Index (GII) as a reference, with its 0.296 GII in 2019, Tunisia occupied the 65th place worldwide in the UNDP ranking of countries³³ with respect to the highest rate of gender equality. This ranking also means that five MENA countries (Bahrein, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) did better than Tunisia in terms of ensuring equal opportunities for both sexes in the field of reproductive health, empowerment and labour market. As for Tunisia, the biggest gap between men and women was identified in the field of participation in the labour market: women 15 years and older only made up 23.8% of the labour market, contrary to 69.4% in the case of men. In Tunisia, the labour market showed huge disparities long before the pandemic and the growing political and social tensions from 2019. It affected graduated youth, especially women, who became long-term unemployed. The national unemployment rate was 15.3% after the outbreak of the Arab Spring, but reached 41.9% among graduated women according to data from December 2013.³⁴ The unemployment rate in general was 55% higher among women in 2019 and extremely high among graduated women (38.8% in 2018).³⁵ A report prepared by UNDP in 2020 sheds light on the feminisation of poverty that increased from 15.5% to 19.7% among women, while men only experienced an increase from 14.8% to 18.7%.³⁶ Regarding the marginalised regions, 61% of women worked in the most vulnerable agricultural sector, among whom only 12% had access to medical and social services.³⁷

As for the political dimension of women's empowerment, in 2011 the participation of women in parliament only reached 26.27%, in 2014 it exceeded the 30% requirement set by the CEDAW. In 2019, 78 seats were occupied by women out of the 217, which is 35.9% political representation (31st place worldwide and first place among Arab countries). However, a regress occurred after the presidential elections of October 2019 and according to the latest IPU data in May 2022, only 57 seats were occupied by women, which means a 26.3% presence (84th place worldwide) in decision-making.³⁸

As mentioned above, the article operates with the classification of Freedom House when defining the democratic status of the country. Freedom House elaborates a complex indicator that takes into account the situation of political rights and participation, the

³³ Elaborated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index (GII) measures inequalities on three main dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and labour market with different indicators in each dimension (UNDP: *Human Development Reports, Gender Inequality Index [GII]*. s. a.).

³⁴ The World Bank: *The Unfinished Revolution. Bringing Opportunity, Good Jobs and Greater Wealth to All Tunisians. Development Policy Review on Socioeconomic Conditions in Tunisia Following the 2011 Revolution* (2014). 24–25, 39–40.

³⁵ Institut National de la Statistique [National Institute of Statistics].

³⁶ PNUD et République Tunisienne [UNDP and the Tunisian Republic]: *Impact économique du Covid-19 en Tunisie. Analyse en termes de vulnérabilité des ménages et des micro et très petites entreprises* [Report Regarding the Economic Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Tunisia]. 16 June 2020. 12.

³⁷ Ministère de la Femme, de la Fertilité et de l'Enfance [Ministry of Women, Fertility and Children]: *Stratégie nationale pour l'autonomisation économique et sociale des femmes et des filles rural, 2017–2020* [National Strategy for the Economic and Social Empowerment of Rural Women and Girls, 2017–2020]. 2.

³⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU): *Monthly Ranking of Women in National Parliaments*. Parline, Global Data on National Parliaments. s. a.

electoral process, civil liberties, the functioning of the government, associational and organisational rights, and rule of law. As for Tunisia, political rights and civil liberties improved significantly after the outbreak of the Arab Spring in late December 2010. Compared with 2010 and the period before 2011 the country became partly free and from 2015 until 2021 Tunisia was regarded a free country in terms of political rights and civil liberties. However, the dissolution of the parliament in July 2021 and the political crisis that followed this measure caused a significant fallback in the country's status that was similar to the pre-Arab Spring period. In 2022 Tunisia was again classified as a partly free country exacerbated by the deepening economic crisis that reached 40.8% among the age group of 15–24 and 24.9%³⁹ in the case of women.

In order to return to the analysis of the key question about *the role women can play in the process of democratisation and the result of the reinforcement of democratic institutions from the point of view of women's rights*, the following chart was elaborated based on Freedom House and IPU data⁴⁰ to examine the correlation between these two variables:

Table 1: The role of women in the process of democracy building

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Status	NF*	PF**	PF	PF	PF	F***	F	F	F	F	F	F	PF
Percentage of women in the national parliament	27.6%	26.7%	26.7%	26.7%	31.3%	31.3%	31.3%	31.3%	31.3%	35.9%	24.9%	26.3%	26.3%

*NF = Not Free

**PF = Partly Free

***F = Free

Source: Compiled by the author based on Freedom House and IPU data.

Note: The percentage of women in the national parliament is based on the January data of each year.

The role of women in the shaping of the political arena

The post-Arab Spring period

From the point of view of gender equality as a result of the extended rights to freedom of expression, the Arab Spring brought about a widespread debate on gender roles during the drafting of Tunisia's new constitution between 2011 and 2014. The passing of the constitution in February 2014 was the manifestation of a long but promising struggle that eliminated any reference to the Sharia and thus ensured equal rights for both sexes based

³⁹ Freedom House: *Freedom in the World 2022. Tunisia*.

⁴⁰ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) (s. a.): op. cit.

on Western type of constitutional guarantees.⁴¹ However, it cannot be neglected that the country's influential trade union and hidden political actor, UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail [Tunisian General Labour Union]) played a key and active role in the mobilisation and empowerment of women since the independence of Tunisia. Due to its diversified network, the trade union succeeded in addressing women in the work force, thus being the main advocate of establishing women's financial independence. Moreover, UGTT pursued awareness campaigns for rural women and contributed to the proliferation of the network of civil societies with the members of which it closely collaborated to exercise pressure on government actors. Therefore, UGTT embodied the modernist or secular discourse of the question of gender, and it also had a significant voice in sweeping off the reference to the Sharia during the drafting of the new constitution.⁴²

In addition to the promulgation of the progressive constitution, the outstanding percentage of female candidates and registered voters (51% vs. 45% compared to the legislative elections of October 2011) during the 2014 elections was a clear proof that the Arab Spring fostered the participation of women in the political field. This was further enhanced by the submission of the presidential candidacy of two women, Emna Mansour al-Karoui and Kalthoum Kennou,⁴³ a historical step in the effort to achieve gender equality. It is indisputable that women's rights NGOs also played a key role in promoting female candidates to legislative and municipal elections due to the elaboration of the electoral law and the pursuance of active campaigns.

From the point view of the bottom-up initiative, the year 2017 was considered a milestone. Law 58 adopted in 2017 envisaged the elimination of violence committed against women in all fields of life, including the labour market, the political sphere and domestic life.⁴⁴ In the long run, the implementation of the law against gender violence is of crucial importance and is greatly appreciated in light of the increased violence committed against women after the outbreak of the pandemic. Another key measure under President Beji Caid Essebsi was the radical amendment to the CSP in September 2017 that enabled Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men. This measure considered exceptional in the Arab world was further enhanced by President Essebsi's urge to introduce reforms to the inheritance law,⁴⁵ a quite divisive, but a progressive topic that was on the agenda since the coming to power of Essebsi in 2014. The main arguments for the reform of the law on equal inheritance included the implementation of international conventions (i.e. CEDAW), the interpretation of the constitution, the task of the committee that was set up in 2016, the pressure coming from non-state actors, and the realisation of equality between men and women. Although for now the inheritance law is removed from the political agenda, the political will during the presidency of Essebsi and the pressure coming from non-state

⁴¹ Nabila Hamza: Engendering Tunisia's Democratic Transition: What Challenges Face Women? In Fatima Sadiqi (ed.): *Women's Movements in Post-"Arab Spring" North Africa*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 214–215, 217.

⁴² The Solidarity Center: *Femme Tunisienne. Soutenir la lutte pour l'égalité des droits*. 2014. 2–7.

⁴³ Hamza (2016): op. cit. 218–219.

⁴⁴ Hind Ahmed Zaki: Why Did Women's Rights Expand in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia? *Middle East Brief, Crown Center for Middle East Studies*, 131 (2019). 2.

⁴⁵ Zaki (2019): op. cit. 2.

actors are excellent proofs that a cooperation between the mezzo and micro levels can be viable.

However, it is to be emphasised that while the legal framework is important to understand the discourse on gender in Tunisia, the implementation of the reforms in everyday life is of crucial importance. In this regard, interviews provide a general view on the basis of which the implementation of reforms can be understood. While acknowledging the active role of women's rights NGOs, especially that of mobilisation during the pandemic with the involvement of government actors, the lack of political strategy and the presence of secular and religious dichotomy, as explained in the introduction are still regarded as constraints from the point of women's empowerment.

The re-emergence of the Islamist discourse in the post-Arab Spring period, and the role Ennahda played in the evolution of women's rights, cannot be neglected. The Islamist discourse is strictly connected to the peculiarity of the Maghrebi society from a cultural and religious perspective. In general, the ideology of Ennahda is similar to Islamic feminism, i.e. it is a progressive approach to the question of gender equality that is open to the adoption of flexible methods besides preserving traditional religious roles. However, as the harsh debates about the drafting of Tunisia's new constitution demonstrated, Tunisian Islamists cannot be regarded homogeneous, they include both moderates and radicals. An excellent example to this division between the two branches was the drafting process of the new Tunisian constitution between 2011 and January 2014 which intended to include that 'women are complementary to men' (complementarity clause).⁴⁶ Regarding the other harsh debate about equal inheritance, according to the viewpoint of one of the female members of Ennahda party, ensuring equality in labour force, in salaries and advancement for women has nothing to do with providing equality in inheritance.⁴⁷ As for political advancement, women still remain underrepresented in key posts and the political office of the party. This all proves that changes in the old roles of women after the Arab Spring should be treated with precaution and with taking into account the limits of religion, political space and socioeconomic reforms.

The consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic brought about new political and economic challenges from the point of view of the significant achievements from 2011 on the improvement of women's rights that required decision-makers to adapt to new strategies and reconsider the question of gender equality. Furthermore, this adaptation required women's rights activists to focus on solving problems on new scopes that also meant a kind of retreat from the presence of the public sphere. The new challenges include growing inequalities in education and in the labour market, namely the overrepresentation of women in the

⁴⁶ Mari Norbakk: The Women's Rights Champion. Tunisia's Potential for Furthering Women's Rights. *CMI Report* (2016). 8.

⁴⁷ Anca Munteanu: Les militantes du Parti de la justice et du développement au Maroc et d'Ennahda en Tunisie: formes d'engagement et d'organisation. *Égypte. Monde Arabe*, 21 (2020).

agricultural sector and in domestic work. However, the most serious impact the pandemic had on women was the increase in domestic violence resulting from the accumulated frustration among the growing socioeconomic and political tensions. In Tunisia between 23 March and 31 May 2020, the number of registered violent cases committed against women was 9 times higher than in general (2,700 cases were violent out of the 9,800) and 76% of Tunisian women experienced physical violence. Furthermore, violence also had its effect in the labour market in the form of deprivation of access to job opportunities as well as in the control of the salaries.⁴⁸ The resolution of the main challenges women had to face required different approaches from decision-makers and NGOs, which resulted in a huge mobilisation among members of the latter. In Tunisia, besides the 24/24 and 7/7 emergency line, a reception centre was also set up by the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Seniors to provide help for asylum seekers to spend the necessary quarantine period there before moving to traditional reception centres. Moreover, in collaboration with different ministries, women's rights organisations launched several awareness campaigns for female victims of domestic violence.⁴⁹

The evolution of women's rights and democracy making, especially in light of the outbreak of the pandemic, show that while improvements were carried out in the political, economic and educational fields and women's rights organisations were present in the public sphere, although ostensibly masculine norms in private life remained dominant.

A bottom-up approach to democratisation

The researcher conducted online interviews in French with five representatives of Tunisian women's rights NGOs between November 2021 and May 2022 to answer the research question and provide empirical verification of the theoretical findings. Interviews are of crucial importance to examine the implementation of the major reforms of the Arab Spring, regarding the fact that representatives of women's rights NGOs play a great role in shaping the process of democratisation. Based on the topics that were raised during the interviews, the chances and results of women's efforts in democracy building and the major constraints of this process can be better understood. Women's rights NGOs were selected purposely for the interviews, based on different criteria (e.g. the availability of the organisations, their location), so that judgmental sampling, a non-random sampling based on the researcher's perception of the relative importance of the chosen sample was applied. The interviews are semi-structured, thus they provide more space to additional questions. The answers were recorded in handwritten notes and analysed based on the grouping of different concepts that were later compared with the initial concepts (codes). The questions posed can be divided into three parts: 1. the way the representative sees the evolution of women's rights after the Arab Spring and in light of the Covid-19 pandemic;

⁴⁸ UN Women: *Tunisian Women in the Face of Covid-19: During and after Confinement*. 2020. 6.

⁴⁹ OCDE [OECD]: *Covid-19 dans la région MENA: impact sur les inégalités de genre et réponses apportées en soutien aux femmes* [Covid-19 in the MENA Region: Impact on Gender Inequalities and Responses Provided in Support of Women]. 2020. 20–21.

2. whether a bottom-up approach can bring about a more gender-friendly environment; and 3. the biggest constraints in front of achieving gender equality.

As for the first block of questions, from the point of view of the activities of her association, the member of the Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement (AFTURD,⁵⁰ Association of Tunisian Women for the Research on Development) regarded the suspension of field work as one of the negative consequences of the pandemic. The interviewee also approached the outcome of the Arab Spring with caution when asking about gender equality. According to her, the realities did not meet the initial expectations and the realisation of equality in the labour market and in inheritance remain those areas where further achievements are necessary. She also highlighted that without the active role of women's rights NGOs, the situation of women in Tunisia would be more catastrophic; as an example, she emphasised the crucial role and fight of NGOs during the drafting of Tunisia's new constitution between 2011 and 2014.

The representative of the Association Citoyenneté et Libertés (ACL,⁵¹ Association for Citizenship and Liberties), based in Djerba, mentioned that the situation of women was well managed even before the Arab Spring. However, without doubt, the events of 2010 and 2011 ensured a greater extent of freedom of expression, which opened the way for NGOs to launch different training programs for women (such a training program concerned 2,000 families, including the field of artisanal jobs, too) and enabled the association to involve women in the discussion of such delicate topics like radicalisation.

The third activist, a syndicalist who collaborates with the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD, Tunisian Association of Democratic Women), and AJEM Djerba⁵² (Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin [Jlij Association for the Marine Environment]) saw a significant degradation in women's rights since 2011 ("en 2011 on était sur le bon chemin" [in 2011 we were on the right track]). According to her in Tunisia, we can talk about the feminisation of poverty, including the increase of the number of illiterate women as a result of the growing influence of the Islamists following the Arab Spring. Although after the Arab Spring a political setback occurred, the pandemic caused a social setback, a fight for the amelioration of socioeconomic conditions, in which the question of gender equality began to occupy a marginal position.

The member of AJEM Djerba⁵³ also highlighted the role of education and change in mentality as key areas for democratisation and according to the fourth representative, women are doing well in education where women have more than equal participation.

⁵⁰ The women's rights NGO, Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement (AFTURD) is only available through the organisation's official Facebook page. The member of AFTURD was questioned on 13 November via Messenger.

⁵¹ See the official website of the Association Citoyenneté et Libertés (ACL) in the bibliography. The representative of ACL was questioned through Messenger on 24 December 2021.

⁵² See the official website of the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) and Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba in the bibliography. The interview was realised on 5 January 2022 via Messenger.

⁵³ The interview was conducted on 14 January via Messenger.

Similarly to the third interviewee, the fifth women's rights activist, also a member of the Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne (UNFT, National Union of Tunisian Women),⁵⁴ AFTURD and Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme (LTDH, Tunisian League for Human Rights), also claimed that since 2011 there has been a significant increase in the number of school dropouts. She also linked this phenomenon to the infiltration of Islamists in the political arena.

Regarding the possible correlation between bottom-up initiatives and the improvement of women's rights, the interviewees themselves were quite divided. While generally acknowledging the crucial role of women's rights organisations in women's mobilisation, the representative of ACL shed light on the actual political crisis that slows down their mobilisation campaign. According to the member of ATFD and AJEM Djerba, the socioeconomic crisis aggravated by the pandemic overwrote the conventional role of women's rights activists that were required to adapt to the individual needs of women, especially those living in rural regions with half the salary of men. The fifth activist saw the lack of political will of actual policy makers as the biggest obstacle in the way of achieving gender equality. She also mentioned the measures related to President Bourguiba as an example of real political intention.

The absence of a clear strategic vision for the country, mentality, refusal of development, rigid cultural norms, lack of cultural integrity, as well as the right to cultural and intellectual development, lack of knowledge about individual and collective rights were mentioned by the interviewees in the third block of questions regarding the constraints to realising gender equality.

Conclusion

The article analysed the role of women in the process of democracy building from a new perspective that explained state behaviour with the conventional masculine and feminine roles in the public and private spheres. The relevance of the research is emphasised by the growing political and economic tensions in Tunisia, which also led to a setback in the classification of Tunisia from free to partly free country in 2022 according to the annual country report of Freedom House.

Based on previous findings of scholars who drew a parallel between women's political participation and democracy making, the article took women's presence in the national parliament as a reference to compare with the country ratings of Freedom House. The statistics of IPU and Freedom House clearly proved that the increase or decrease in the number of women's share in parliament had an impact on the classification of Tunisia in two to three years. A brief outlook of the main achievements of women's rights activists after the Arab Spring also proved that significant developments coincided with the increase in the political presence of women and the 'free' classification of Tunisia.

⁵⁴ See the official website of the Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne (UNFT) and Ligue tunisienne des droits de l'homme (LTDH) in the bibliography. The women's rights activist was questioned on 20 May via Messenger.

The empirical part of the article also confirmed the outstanding mobilisation of different NGOs following the Arab Spring and during the Covid-19 pandemic to the benefit of the vulnerable groups that contributed to significant developments in this regard. However, the interviews conducted with women's rights activists and the current processes proved that democratisation is a complex process that not only requires the analysis of political or historical experiences, but, as Huntington concluded, economic factors. As Moghadam highlighted, a women-friendly democracy not only depends on the institutional legacy of the past and the mobilisation of women's rights NGOs, but on the capacity of the government to carry out significant social and economic reforms.⁵⁵ On the one hand, the Covid-19 pandemic showed an exemplary cooperation between women's rights NGOs. On the other hand, it brought about new challenges that require that the socioeconomic needs of women be given priority.

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⁵⁵ Valentine M. Moghadam: Modernising Women and Democratisation after the Arab Spring. In Andrea Khalil (ed.): *Gender, Women and the Arab Spring*. Oxon, Routledge, 2015. 7–12.

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