



ON WOMEN'S AGENCY AND WESTERN REPRESENTATIONS: EU APPROACH TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN TUNISIA

Del protagonismo de las mujeres y las representaciones occidentales: el enfoque de la UE en los derechos de las mujeres en Túnez

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Starting from a historical overview of women's activism in Tunisia, this paper focuses on the agency played by female associations during and after the 2011 uprising. This agency contributed to making Tunisia the only "promising" democratic transition among the so-called "Arab Springs". At the same time –through document analysis and interviews in the field–, it investigates EU support to these associations, with a double objective. On the one hand, it aims to deconstruct Western stereotyped narrative (Mohanty, 1999) on Tunisian women. On the other hand, it seeks to investigate how such a kind of narrative influences EU support for women's associations in loco and, consequently, for the more general Tunisian democratic transition. Therefore, it is aimed at questioning the European approach to the southern neighbourhood and the "meta-narrative" (Cebeci, 2012) that has been built upon it over the years.



Abstract

Tunisia; women; agency; EU; Arab Spring.
Túnez; mujeres; agencia; UE; Primavera Árabe.



Key words

Empezando desde una perspectiva histórica sobre el activismo de las mujeres en Túnez, este artículo analiza la agencia de las asociaciones femeninas durante y después de los levantamientos de 2011. Esta contribuyó a que Túnez fuera considerada la única transición democrática "prometedora" entre las llamadas Primaveras Árabes. A través de un análisis de documentos y entrevistas, se investiga el apoyo de la UE a estas asociaciones, con un doble objetivo. Primero, deconstruir la narrativa estereotipada occidental (Mohanty, 1999) acerca de las mujeres tunecinas. En segundo lugar, investigar cómo esta narrativa influencia el apoyo de la UE a las asociaciones de mujeres en Túnez, y en consecuencia, a su transición democrática en general. Por lo tanto, el objetivo es cuestionar el enfoque europeo de la vecindad sur y la "metanarrativa" (Cebeci, 2012) que se ha construido sobre ello a lo largo de los años.



Resumen

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Fechas

1. Introduction

On 17 December 2010 in Sidi Bouzid (Tunisia), a 26-year-old street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire after a municipal officer seized the cart on which he was carrying his wares. This gesture of desperate protest triggered a series of popular uprisings which eventually led the Head of State, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, to step down after 23 years in power. Thanks to social networks, the news of Tunisian civil society protesting for “travail, liberté et dignité” spread throughout North Africa.

The gesture of Mohamed Bouazizi, symbol of what has been labelled as the “Arab Spring”, however, has deeper roots in time. Indeed, the “Arab Spring” was preceded by several social struggles, to which women greatly contributed. It was 5 January 2008, when Tunisian women came down the streets of Redeyef, one of the cities around the Gafsa mining area (southwest of Tunisia), shouting “le travail est un droit, bande de voleurs!”, a slogan that would be then used during the Tunisian “Spring”. The Gafsa’s region economy was based solely on phosphate production and every other productive activity –in particular agriculture– had been swept away and the environment completely contaminated. Thirteen women camped for months on Redeyef’s ferry routes, generating a protest movement that would soon extend to the whole region, embracing issues such as unemployment, insecurity, poverty, corruption and pollution, and questioning the very same socio-political choices of Ben Ali and his entourage (ATFD, forthcoming).

Already active in the period prior to the so-called “Jasmine Revolution” between December 2010 and January 2011, Tunisian women have surely been one of the main souls of the revolution as well as a reference point for other civil society components.

Protagonists in the demonstration at Avenue Bourghiba (Tunis), which on 14 January 2011 forced Ben Ali to flee, Tunisian women were also a driving force during the transitional period that followed. Extremely active within the “Haute Instance pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution”, guarantors on the grounds of female participation in the electoral process, Tunisian women have been committed to the elimination of the reservations to the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) and to the inclusion of their rights within the Constitution. The charter adopted in January 2014 owes a lot to them in terms of equality and respect for human rights in general.

This paper draws inspiration precisely from Tunisian women’s experiences. It starts from an historical overview of female activism in the country (first section) and then moves on to focus on the role played by women’s associations during the 2011 uprising and the following transitional period (second section), by highlighting both women’s achievements and challenges. The analysis of the period 2011-now reveals the presence of a strong agency by Tunisian women. This agency contributed greatly to making Tunisia the only “promising” democratic transition among the so-called “Arab Springs”. The third section of the paper is based on the recognition of this agency, with the aim, on the one hand, to questioning the Western stereotyped narrative regarding non-Western women that has been largely criticised by post-colonial and Afro-American feminist scholars. Indeed, as suggested by Mohanty (1998), “under western eyes” there is the tendency to underestimate women’s agency when it comes to social, cultural, and religious contexts different from Western ones. On the other hand, this section seeks to investigate how this kind of narrative influences the approach of the EU –both politically and in terms of funding within specific European policies, such as the “European Neighbourhood Policy” (ENP)– to women’s rights

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promotion in Tunisia. Therefore, it is aimed at questioning the European approach to human rights' promotion in the southern neighbourhood, and the "meta-narrative" that has been built upon it during the years, in particular through the epistemological practices of the "EU-as-a-model" discourse and the "Normative Power Europe" discourse (Cebeci, 2012). In other words, this section engages in a critical reflection that lies at the intersection of post-colonial/Afro-American feminist studies and EU studies on the international identity of the Union. The fourth section presents the results of a fieldwork conducted in Tunisia between March and July 2017 as a part of a larger research on the change in EU approach to human rights in the Southern Mediterranean neighbours after the 2011 uprisings and the following ENP revisions. The fieldwork combined document analysis related to EU policies and projects for women in Tunisia with 35 semi-structured interviews to all the actors involved in EU gender-founded projects (i.e. EU delegates in Tunis, local institutions, international organizations, local associations, female activists and experts). The aim of the fieldwork was to understand the local perception about EU approach to women's rights promotion. Finally, the conclusions analyse the results emerged from the fieldwork in the light of the previous theoretical reflections.

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2. Feminine activism in Tunisia: a historical overview

Tunisian society, as well as most of the Mediterranean area, is distinguished by a long-standing "transculturality". As Leila El Houssi (2013) explains, the mixture of Mediterranean people –Phoenicians, Berbers, Arabs, Italians, Maltese and French– who have inhabited these lands leaves an important legacy in terms of cultural dynamism, religious coexistence and habit to comparison. From this legacy there derives the absence of a unique model of feminist discourse within the Arab world, which is rather characterized by diversified reflections, which have been related from time to time with colonial powers, nationalist movements, authoritarian regimes, ideologies, and political organizations of Marxist and Islamist matrix.

In Tunisia, women's demands are undoubtedly functional to the process of independence and play a key role in the post-colonial reconstruction process. It is already around the middle of the twentieth century, namely in 1936, that the Union Musulmane de Femmes en Tunisie (UMFT) was born on the initiative of Bchira Ben Mrad, following the readings of the Egyptian Hud Sha'rāwi, who in 1923 founded the Union of Egyptian Feminists (UFE). But in the aftermath of independence from France in 1956, women's claims become instrumental to the process of state modernization initiated by the first Tunisian President, Habib Bourghiba and his party Néo-Dustūr. It is at this time that the expression "State Feminism"¹ came about: Bourghiba dissolved pre-existing feminist associations and created a single large association, the Union National de la Femme Tunisienne (UNFT), which was functional in the process promoted by the Néo-Dustūr. Thus, in 1956, Tunisia was given a Code of Personal Status that appears to have no equivalent compared to other Muslim majority countries: it includes the abolition of polygamy, the suppression of the practice of repudiation, the minimum age for marriage fixed at age 18 and the introduction of free consent between the parties.

Despite the unquestionable freedom granted to women by the Code, however, we should bear in mind the instrumental function that the Code has in Bourghiba's strategy. The "women's rights' card" is played by the President to legitimize what is de facto an authoritarian government in the

1 See on this point: S. Bessis (1999), A. Mhadahbi (2012), E. C. Murphy (2003).

eyes of Western countries. The same card would also be played by Ben Ali, as several scholars of Euro-Mediterranean relations would later denounce, starting with Jean-Pierre Cassarino (2012).

In the framework of “State Feminism”, therefore, Tunisian women, although they may enjoy greater equality between men and women in legal terms, find themselves struggling against a dictatorship that suffocates any form of freedom. Only towards the end of the last century, in 1980, did an autonomous feminist movement reappear with the creation of the “Tahar Haddad Club”².

Thanks to this space of ideas, Tunisian women are able to push aside the concept of “State Feminism” and denounce the “liberator’s (as Bourghiba was termed) apology”. They undertake a difficult battle on the grounds of fundamental rights, radically departing from official discourses on women’s legal acquisitions, and denouncing the patriarchal domination mechanism and discrimination contained in the Personal Statute on issues such as the lack of equality in the inheritance and male privilege of the granting of marital domicile in the event of divorce (Daniele, 2014). It is at this time that the two main Tunisian feminist associations are born: Association Tunisienne de Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) in 1982; and Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement (AFTURD) in 1986, even if both of them would be formally institutionalized only after the end of Bourghiba’s government.

With the advent of Ben Ali in 1987, “State Feminism” seems to find new spaces. The female question is again instrumental in the government’s program: the president becomes the symbol of the building of a democratic and secular Tunisia, and the woman is functional to that construction. In fact, despite the apparent push for modernization and openness, the oppression of the regime continues to be felt even in the female sphere: veiled women are persecuted and often banned from practicing their profession because of clothing. The issue therefore is whether the secularization from above in the era of Ben Ali’s regime (1987-2011) coincided with the transformation from below; whether the misuse of power and force has neutralized the democratic potential of women (and more generally human) rights; and whether the acquisition of rights has been made in respect of women’s rights or has been instrumental in starting a country’s development policy (El Houssi, 2013).

Paralyzed in the grip of Bourghiba before and Ben Ali after, it is only after the 2011 uprising that Tunisian female associations finds full (and more or less) free expression, and there is a multiplication of small and medium-sized, secular and religious realities alongside the historical ATFD and AFTURD. Even with different ideals and perspectives, these various women’s realities direct their battle to the dual task of combating all forms of man-woman discrimination and to remove exploitation, oppression and domination caused by the strong asymmetries existing in individual, religious, gender and social class relationships (Daniele, 2014).

3. Feminine activism in the post-Ben Ali era: divergences, achievements, challenges

On 23 October 2011, day of the first free and democratic elections in Tunisia for the Constituent Assembly, the Islamic Party of “Ennahda” obtained 47% of the vote (90 seats out of 217): a deep shock in a country where Islam had always been committed to *laïcité*.

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² Tahar Haddad (1899-1935) was one of the main theorists of the Islamic reformism. Author of the book *Notre femme Tunisienne entre la législation islamique et la société*, Imprimerie Technique rue de l’Eglise, Tunisi, 1930.

The party's orientation seems to be that of reaffirming the existence of a necessary link between religion and identity, where Islam would play a key role. The gender's issue would then become functional to politics, and the Tunisian woman could find herself in the process of building, reconstructing, defining and redefining her identity.

Within this process, the possibility of re-occupying its own religious and cultural identity after a long period of authoritarianism leads to a process of "re-islamization" by many women and the creation of Islamic feminist associations, such as the Tunisian Women Association, founded in April 2011.

Thus, there begins to appear a divergence of visions between such associations, accusing the secular ones of speaking only to an elite of the population, and the latter, worried about the re-emergence of an Islamic discourse that it is not associated completely with the feminist-liberal goals they pursue. In fact, this kind of divergence, although leading to various ideological clashes in the post-revolutionary period, did not prevent the formation of a common ground of dialogue to improve the legal and social status of women. As suggested by Badran (2011), the forces that eventually collided on Tunisian arena were not so much secular and religious ones, but rather those supporting a patriarchal model of society and those in defence of a status of equality, which ultimately brings together more consent to both religious and secular feminists.

According to the report of the ATFD *De 2008-2011 à 2015: Révolution et Transition Démocratique* (forthcoming), women have been extremely active since the beginning of the transitional period within the "Haute Instance pour la réalisation des objectifs de la révolution", where they fight different battles, such as that for the election of a woman to the vice-presidency; that for the so-called "Republican Pact"; the vote for parity in the electoral lists and the struggle for the participation to the electoral process.

Among the most challenging battles there is certainly that for the inclusion of "equality" rather than man-woman "complementarity" (supported by Islamist parties) within Art.21 of the Constitution, and that for the elimination of all the reservations to the CEDAW, which were both won. Article 21, in fact, states: "Les citoyens et les citoyennes sont égaux en droits et en devoirs. Ils sont égaux devant la loi sans discrimination. L'État garantit aux citoyens et aux citoyennes les libertés et les droits individuels et collectifs. Il leur assure les conditions d'une vie digne". The reservations to the CEDAW were withdrawn in July 2011, with the only exception to the General Statement submitted by Tunisia at the moment of ratification. Consequently, equality before the law of citizens, without any discrimination, became part of the new Charter approved on 27 January 2014 in Art.21, and was also reinforced by Art.46, which states: "L'État s'engage à protéger les droits acquis de la femme, les soutient et ouvre à l'améliorations", continuing: "L'État prend les mesures nécessaires afin d'éradiquer la violence contre les femmes". With regard to the CEDAW, although the rule on the interpretation of fundamental rights and freedoms in accordance with international conventions is not included in the new charter, Art.49 (which is given a constitutional status and therefore cannot be reviewed by referendum) establishes the limit of interpretation in line with the principles of necessity and proportionality. This can be considered –together with the elimination of reservations to the CEDAW– a big step forward for the safeguarding of women's rights.

To these achievements it is important to add the most recent adoption (26 July 2017) of the *Loi intégrale sur la lutte contre la violence faite aux femmes*, which took several years of advocacy efforts led by Tunisian civil society and national institutions in collaboration with international

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organizations. The new law adopts a broad definition of violence by recognizing, in addition to the physical one, economic, sexual, political and psychological forms of violence. It also provides for new mechanisms of protection (i.e. access to necessary services and legal and psychological assistance) for victims of violence. This therefore reinforces the content of Art.46 of the Constitution. Moreover, the law eliminates impunity for perpetrators of violence, by amending Art.227 bis of the Penal Code, which pardoned a perpetrator of a sexual act with a minor when he married his victim. According to the new Art.227 bis, the perpetrator of a sexual act with a consenting 16-year-old woman is condemned to 6 years' imprisonment (5 years if the consenting woman is between 16 and 18-year-old). The punishment is doubled if the perpetrator belongs to the family circle of the victim or he exercises influence over her. Another important measure introduced by the law is the ban on the employment of minors as domestic helpers, which will henceforth be sanctioned from 3 to 6 months' imprisonment (Bellamine, 2017). Finally, on 14 September 2017 the 1973 administrative circular was abolished. This prevented a Tunisian woman from marrying a non-Muslim man and constituted gross discrimination since the same ban was not foreseen for a Tunisian man willing to marry a non-Muslim woman (Bobin, 2017).

In conclusion, without satisfying all women's claims, the Constitution and the consequent legislation certainly play an important part. According to feminist associations, the strongest resistance is related to full equality and the inclusion of non-discrimination within the private and familiar sphere. The imprecision of Art.46 on the *acquis* of women and the absence of an express reference to the Personal Statute (except for submitting all the revisions to a referendum, Art.82), will undoubtedly prompt future battlefields. In particular, the various associations are mobilizing on the issue of women/men parity with regard to the right to inheritance. In a country that, according to one of the latest researches published by the Centre de Recherches, Études, Documentation and Information sur la Femme (CREDIF, 2016), is still in 127th place of the Gender Gap out of 145 countries, it remains fundamental to maintain a focus on two processes. The first, at a legal level, is to harmonize the laws of the country with the rules contained in the new Constitution: a Criminal Code founded on the principle of equality and not on a moralistic view of relations between individuals; a Code of Statutory Staff without discriminatory articles; a non-sexist Work Code that respects the rights and dignity of women. In other words, a process of vigilance is needed on the implementation of what is contained in the Constitution. The second, equally important, is at a cultural-social level: here a great effort is still needed in spreading the culture of equality and democracy, by mobilizing against all taboos regarding a woman's body and sexual freedom, as well as against clichés, stereotypes and messages spread by some media.

4. Tunisian women's agency and Western representations

The historical overview on women's activism in Tunisia, and in particular their contribution to the 2011 uprisings and the following transitional period, clearly reveals an extraordinary form of agency. Indeed, as Anna Loretoni (2013) suggests:

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supported on the basis of a substantial essentialism: the stereotype of a Muslim woman dominated and passive, incapable of any agency³. (p. 12)

Tunisian experience deconstructs, in fact, such a kind of stereotype, and prompts a new type of analysis able to overcome the traditional Western victim-oriented approach. This kind of analysis has been made, among others, by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in his famous “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse” (1999), with the primary purpose of deconstructing Robin Morgan’s concept of “universal sisterhood” (1984). According to Mohanty, this concept risks to represent women –regardless of the cultural, social, religious context, and the specific historical moment– as a homogeneous group, characterized by the same experiences, the same needs and, consequently, the same interests and objectives. This type of representation leads to ascribe to the varied female universe the same form of oppression and, therefore, of political resistance and commitment, which is likely to underestimate/fail to see forms and expressions different from Western ones, as in the case of the so-called “black feminism” or that of the Arab-Muslim contexts.

Mohanty reproaches Western narrative for:

Having colonized the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular ‘third-world woman’ –an image which appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of western humanist discourse–. (Mohanty, 1999, p. 63)

Among the various discursive constructions on the female universe to which Mohanty refers, the most useful for this study are, on the one hand, that of women and the family system; and on the other, that of women and religious ideologies. The first departs from the assumption of a single patriarchal system oppressing women common to all Arab-Muslim societies. Patriarchal systems are different in over twenty Arab-Muslim countries, and thus levels of oppression, and consequently battles that women have to fight differ from country to country. While in some countries these battles are almost impossible, in others –as shown here with the Tunisian case– they are conceivable and, above all, put into practice.

The second interesting discursive construction for the purpose of this analysis is that of women subjected to religious ideology, therefore devoid of their very identity: as women are subjected to a religion presented in fundamental terms, it is as if they were blocked in a “historical time”, in which they have no way of moving out of. This also cannot be said in the case of Tunisia, where women –not only those secular but also those with religious beliefs– have been able to cope with their oppression and find a common ground of dialogue to pursue common battles, without renouncing –in the case of religious ones– their Islamic belief.

The deprivation of agency that derives from this still colonialist and ethnocentric representation of non-Western women risks having consequences not only in terms of discourse construction, but also with regard to the approach that Western (in the case of this paper, European) countries adopt when it comes to supporting/promoting women’s rights in a non-Western country. Indeed,

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3 Author’s translation of the original text: “Comprendere quanto è emerso nella ‘Primavera Araba’ in relazione ad un punto di vista di genere fa immediatamente emergere l’inadeguatezza di quella rappresentazione che l’Occidente ha da sempre sostenuto sulla base di un sostanziale essenzialismo: lo stereotipo di una donna musulmana succube e passiva, incapace di qualsiasi agency”.

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This tendency could be linked to what Kmar Bendana, Professor of History at the University La Manouba in Tunis, calls the “story of European universalism”. Quoting her words:

The EU has always related to Tunisia –and, in general, to southern Mediterranean countries– convinced of the story of its universalism. This story, however, is an illusion, stemming from the fact that Europe has dominated the world for a long time, by consequently developing the idea of being universal. I would call this idea ‘collective unconsciousness’. The universal is not global: it is a European (philosophical and political) invention, dated at a precise historical moment. (Kmar Bendana, personal communication, 8 November 2016)

Combined with Mohanty’s critique to the concept of “universal sisterhood”, the “story of European universalism” referred to by Professor Bendana suggests having a look at some critiques within EU studies regarding the construction of an “Ideal Power Europe” through meta-narrative. In particular, Munevver Cebeci (2012) states that this meta-narrative is built through the use of three epistemological practices: 1) the discourse on post-sovereign and postmodern EU; 2) the EU as a model discourse; 3) and the “Normative Power Europe” (NPE) discourse.

The second and the third seem particularly relevant to this analysis. Indeed, Cebeci talks about an asymmetrical approach towards some third countries (especially those which request full membership, association agreements or trade benefits). According to her:

By imposing their own model without considering the specific cultural, economic and social characteristics of certain regions and countries, the Europeans encourage mimicry and, in a sense, add to the colonial tradition rather than engaging the people of those regions and meeting their local needs. (Cebeci, 2012, p. 572)

This asymmetrical approach is related also to the third epistemological practice: the NPE discourse, initiated by Ian Manners in 2002. According to this discourse, the Union poses at the basis of its foreign policy a set of norms, values and procedures that all serves a similar scope: compliance with what the EU sets as “normal” (Manners, 2002). From this derives the asymmetrical relationship that the Union establishes with others: a relation based on what is called the principle of “conditionality” (i.e. the EU establishes the rules and the content of the agreement and the others have to follow suit).

On the basis of these epistemological practices, the “Ideal Power Europe” meta-narrative has also a legitimating function: “It is rather a European Idea(l) on track and yet to be realised as a *project* –‘a future to be brought about’– that gives the EU its legitimacy” (Cebeci, 2012, p. 580). Indeed, all the studies on NPE emphasize the universality of norms and values that the Union feels it has to spread throughout the world, by thus nourishing a “liberal tendency towards claims of the universal, timeless, hegemonic fixity of a dominant western, customary praxis” (Cebeci, 2012, p. 580), which indirectly presupposes the superiority of such western practices and risks legitimating subtle forms of colonialism.

If we look, for example, into the practice of EU gender mainstreaming, we can see that, even if the 2011 uprisings have prompted the EU to refocus on women, gender mainstreaming has remained a unidirectional policy. As Serena Giusti (2017) suggests –on the basis of a

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parallel analysis of the New Framework for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Transforming the Lives of Girls and Women through EU External Relations (2016-2020) and the last ENP revision (2015)—:

Gender mainstreaming has been pursued through the usual practice, largely used in recent enlargements: norm diffusion. This method does not allow for a reconceptualization of the policies issued: partners only have the possibility of deciding the pace of implementation of a set of goals selected among those recommended by the EU. (p. 1)

Indeed, as also Maryam Khalid (2015) noticed, EU policies in the MENA region have used normatively loaded gender policies to delimit boundaries between the “civilized West” and the backward “Arab world”, thus Western discourse towards the region has focused on the victimization of marginalized gender groups, so denying their agency. As a consequence, EU gender strategy has mainly focused on the external aspects of women/men inequalities, but it has underestimated cultural, domestic and familial obstacles and neglected national debates or the contributions of local feminists, thereby failing to face the real causes of inequalities.

These reflections seem to be completely in line with both Kmar Bendana's perception about the EU approach to Tunisia and Mohanty's reflections on the Western representation of women's agency in different contexts. At the same time, they seem to prompt a new kind of narrative about the EU, the Mediterranean and EU relations with the Mediterranean. A good example of this new narrative is the one proposed by the MEDRESET Project. Indeed, the project considers the Mediterranean region as including but not being limited to the EU's definition:

The Mediterranean is not a pre-given geographical fact, but the result of interests, identity, narratives, practices, and interactions. The Mediterranean exists through the various imaginations of its stakeholders. Thus, the region may include other geographies and geopolitical dynamics which are currently excluded from the EU's construction, but are of key importance for the future effectiveness and potential of EU policies in the region. (Huber and Paciello, 2016, p. 6)

Tunisia is among the major beneficiaries of the “more for more” approach, introduced with the revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

5. EU approach to women's rights in Tunisia: voices from the field

As is well known, Tunisia is among the major beneficiaries of the “more for more” approach⁴, introduced with the revision of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in March 2011. Only for this year, the Union doubled the funds allocated to the country (from 80 to 160 million euros), following its good performance in terms of democratic reforms and human rights protection.

According to the EU Delegation in Tunis, especially since 2013, funding for projects aimed at improving women's conditions and rights has been substantial (EU Delegation in Tunis, Personal Communication, 13 April 2017). As set out in the latest report by the Delegation (2017), following the EU-Tunisian bilateral agreement signed on 30 April 2015, the majority

⁴ The “more for more” approach is based on greater economic support from the EU to those countries that better perform in terms of democratic and human rights' reforms. From: European Commission and High Representative, *Joint Communication to the European Council, the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A partnership for Democracy and Shared Prosperity with the South Mediterranean*, COM (2011) 200 final, Bruxelles, 8 March 2011.

of EU funding in 2016 (i.e. 7 million euro), was destined to the program “*Promotion de l'égalité femmes-hommes en Tunisie*”, under the direction of the Tunisian Ministry of Women, Family and Child Care (MFFE). The funding destined to projects (mainly implemented by international organizations in partnership with local associations) was divided as follows: 550,000 euros for the “*Aide et Accueil des femmes victimes de violence au Kef, à Beja, et Jendouba*” (2013-2016); 240,000 for the “*Promotion de l'égalité professionnel femmes-hommes en Tunisie*” (2014-2017); 211,000 for “*Karama-Dignité à Gafsa, Kairouan, Sousse, Sfax et Ariana*” (2014-2016); 229,000 for the “*Prévention de la violence sexuelle à l'égard des enfants et notamment des petites filles*” (2014-2016); 300,000 for the “*Sensibilisation des étudiant(e)s tunisiens à la préservation des droits de la femme et à une meilleure compréhension du modèle patriarcal*” (2014-2016); 600,000 for “*Pour un meilleure application des droits des enfants sans soutien familial en Tunisie*” (2016-2019).

Moreover, the country is included in several regional programmes, namely: “*Spring Forward – un bond en avant pour les femmes*” (2012-2016), 7 million euro out of which 600.000 for Tunisia; “*Appui à l'émancipation socio-économique des femmes rurales en Tunisie et au Maroc à travers leur inclusion dans les réseaux de l'économie sociale*” (2012-2016), 940.000 euros; “*Pour une meilleure insertion sociale et professionnelle des mères célibataires au Maghreb*” (2013-2016), 845.000 euros; “*Women's response to the Arab Spring*” (2013-2015), 588.000 euros; “*Renforcer les capacités dans le sud de la méditerranée afin d'ouvrir le dialogue et le suivi des politiques pour les femmes dans la société*” (2015-2017), 969.000 euros.

Taking into account the different actors involved in this panorama, a total of 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Tunisia in the period going from March to July 2017. More precisely, international organizations (14 interviews) and local associations (12 interviews) beneficiaries of EU funding composed the main unit of the interviews (in both cases, persons in charge of the EU-funded projects). In order to ensure data triangulation and to have a more detailed and balanced picture of the phenomenon investigated, 2 interviews were conducted with EU delegates in Tunis, 2 with representatives of national institutions working on women's rights, 2 with feminist activists and other 2 with local experts in women's rights and EU-Tunisian cooperation⁵. The interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes and were mainly aimed at investigating the main issues related to the EU approach to women's rights promotion in the field from a local perspective. For this reason, the qualitative analysis of the interviews that has been made for this paper mainly concerns the local actors' points of view. According to this analysis, four macro-areas have been identified that seem to be relevant to the scope of this work.

Firstly, according to both local associations and international organizations, the fact that the majority of EU funding is destined to the bilateral program with the Tunisian government reveals that the Union has not changed its approach following the 2011 uprisings. Indeed, even if after that moment the Union recognised the important role played by civil society and has re-focused its action on the support to civil society, it has changed neither its main actors of reference nor its methods. In the words of one of the interviewees: “the Union continues to choose the same actors as privileged local interlocutors, namely those that are closer to the values of the Union, but which are not necessarily representative of the country's reality” (International organization, personal communication, April 14, 2017).

The fact that the majority of EU funding is destined to the bilateral program with the Tunisian government reveals that the Union has not changed its approach following the 2011 uprisings

⁵ For the list of the interviews see annex 2.

Secondly, both local association and feminist activists complained about the lack of open political and economic support to civil society's advocacy campaigns regarding the improvement of women's condition and rights in legal texts. This view is also supported by a large number of international organizations. In particular, in the case of the advocacy campaign for the *Loi intégrale sur la lutte contre la violence faite aux femmes*, a coalition of 60 associations from civil society was put in place, but it was not able to access EU funding. This was because the total EU budget destined to the "*Loi intégrale*" was already assigned to the third axis –"*Lutte contre toutes les discriminations et violences fondées sur le genre*"– of the bilateral program between the Union and the Tunisian Government. Since civil society's associations were in disagreement with the Government regarding many relevant points of the law, they felt the lack of support from the Union.

Thirdly, local associations, international organizations and national institutions stressed the difficulties as to the possibility of accessing EU funding for local associations. Indeed, not only is it difficult to respond to EU calls for proposals since their guidelines are rather complicated, but also the European financial and technical requirements to implement the project are too demanding for local associations –which in the majority of the cases were instituted after 2011–, thereby not possessing a solid administrative, technical, and financial structure. Indeed, according to EU procedures, the Union usually finances the 80% of the project, the other 20% being found by the association that wins the call for proposal. Furthermore, the association has to find in advance the last financial part of the project (which will be reimbursed by the EU only when the project has been concluded). Finally, the Union usually funds projects starting from a budget of 200.000 euros, which is a huge amount for a small and young association. "To satisfy such requirements", quoting one of the interviewees, "an association should have an annual budget of around 1.2 million euros, and no Tunisian association has it, except for the historical ones" (Local association, personal communication, 9 June 2017). In summary, both the guidelines of the calls for proposals and the technical-financial requirements do not fit the capacities of Tunisian associations, and the consequence is that they are always obliged to apply to a call for proposal in partnership with international organizations. In fact, out of the gender-related projects funded in 2016 by the EU, only two are implemented by Tunisian associations –*Images et Paroles des Femmes*, *Femmes et Leadership* and *ATUDE*– alone and in complete autonomy. In the face of such difficulties, according to the majority of the interviewees, the EU does not provide adequate training on capacity building, which could help local associations in applying to a call for proposals.

Finally, both local associations and international organizations complained about the lack of continuity in EU funding. Normally, EU-funded projects last from 3 to 5 years, but they cannot get more funding after that period. Indeed, the EU adopts a results-driven approach that does not work in the case of projects oriented to generating long-term social change, which normally needs more than 3 or 5 years. "This", according to one of the interviewees, "is especially true in the case of gender-related projects where the change has to deal with patriarchal praxis which are well-rooted in the society" (Local association, personal communication, 3 July 2017).

Local associations, international organizations and national institutions stressed the difficulties as to the possibility of accessing EU funding for local associations

6. Conclusions

This paper attempted to combine a critical theoretical approach lying at the intersection of gender and European studies with insights coming directly from the field. Even if it represents

work-in-progress research, it nevertheless offers some relevant points of reflection. Indeed, the four macro-areas emerging from the analysis of the interviews underline issues that can be linked to the theoretical reflections previously discussed. First of all, the fact that the EU continues to favour government actors as privileged local interlocutors reveals a lack of trust in female associations. EU institutions, therefore, undervalue these associations' agency, notwithstanding the important role they played both in the 2011 uprising and the following transitional period, as the first two sections of this paper emphasized. This leads to a lack of political and economic support to these associations from the Union, as in the case of the advocacy campaign for the "Loi Intégrale". Secondly, the fact that EU guidelines and technical-financial requirements for accessing funding are so demanding for Tunisian associations means, on the one hand, that they are based on purely European standards, thereby not fitting the reality of local civil society. On the other hand, these associations have to resort to international NGOs, which prevent them from developing and fostering their own specific form of agency. Finally, the lack of continuity in EU funding reveals how the EU is detached from local social, cultural, and religious specificities, not being therefore capable of supporting long-term change in the society. All of this fits with the criticism directed at the EU as-a-model discourse and the NPE discourse, by prompting a new way of conceiving, and thereby narrating, the EU approach to women's rights promotion in a context different from the European one.

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Appendix I: EU gender-funded projects in 2016



Source: EU Delegation in Tunis, *Rapport d'activité. Edition 2017*, p. 108.

Appendix II: List of Interviews

- » EU Delegation, Tunis
- » ONFP (Office National de la Femme et de la Population), Tunis
- » Ministère des Affaires de la Femme et de la Famille, Tunis
- » CREDIF (Centre de Recherches, Études, Documentation and Information sur la Femme), Tunis
- » CAWTAR (Centre de la Femme Arabe pour la Formation et la Recherche), Tunis
- » COSPE (Italian NGO), Tunis
- » CIDEAL (Spanish NGO), Tunis
- » CEFA (Italian NGO), Tunis
- » Santé Sud (French NGO), Tunis
- » Soyons Actif/Actives (French international Program), Tunis
- » UN WOMEN, Tunis
- » UNFPA, Tunis
- » OXFAM Novib, Tunis
- » EuroMed Droits, Tunis
- » Conseil de l'Europe, Tunis
- » ATFD (Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates), Tunis
- » ATFD (Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates), Sfax
- » AFTURD (Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement), Tunis
- » ATUDE, Tunis
- » Association Femme et Citoyanneté, El Kef
- » Association Rayhana, Jendouba
- » Association La Victoire de la Femme Rurale, Sidi Bouzid
- » Association Images et Parole de Femme, Tunis
- » Association TAMSS, Tunis
- » Association Réseau Amen Enfance, Tunis
- » IRMC (Institut de Recherche sur le Maghreb Contemporain), Tunis
- » Université La Manouba, Tunis
- » Université Tunis ElManar, Tunis