

**Transcending the Islamist-Secular Dichotomy:  
Transnational Advocacy Networks and Women's  
Rights During the Arab Spring Period**

**by  
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## Declaration of Committee

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## **Abstract**

Throughout the twentieth century, the status of women in Tunisia was often entangled in political conflicts and debates over the nation, modernity, and Islamic cultural authenticity. State feminism and Islamist-secularist contention thus played key roles in shaping discourse around women's rights. Since the end of the twentieth century, however, an independent women's movement has advocated its own agenda. There has been a notable shift in how these advocates coordinate with transnational advocacy networks (TAN) and present their issues nationally. This new mode of activism has enabled women's groups to leverage international influence whilst mitigating state cooptation of the women's rights agenda. This shift in tactics is embodied especially through the use of transnational networking strategies and the use of information technology to bridge the local to the global. In order to fully account the significance of this shift, I examine the development of women's rights advocacy in Tunisia from 1956 to 2020. I show that new modes of advocacy have significantly changed the ways that women in Tunisia perceive and engage with women's rights issues, which ultimately connects their struggle to a broader human rights agenda and a global feminist framework.

**Keywords:** Transnational advocacy networks; Arab spring; Women's rights; Islamists; Tunisia

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## **Dedication**

*This work is dedicated to both my loving parents and my husband.*

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## List of Acronyms

<u>Acronym</u>	<u>Expansion</u>
ATFD	Tunisian Association for Democratic Women
AFTURD	Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development
CME	Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalite
CPS	Code of Personal Status
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
GBV	Gender Based Violence
IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IGO	International Governmental Organizations
ISCAN	International Civil Society Action Network
LTDH	Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights
TAN	Transnational Advocacy Networks
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFT	Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes
VAW	Violence Against Women

## **Preface**

This dissertation is an original and independent work by the author, J. Athalia. This is based on the contribution of the author to the work published or will be published as a result of collaborations with other researchers.

# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

### 1.1. Introduction and Objectives

Throughout the twentieth century the status of women in Tunisia was often entangled in political conflicts and debates focused on issues such as nationalism, modernity, and Islamic cultural authenticity. At the end of the twentieth century we begin to see the rise of an independent women's movement that is determined to break away from state control and identitarian dichotomies (secular-religious interactions) to instead pursue its own agenda (Charrad, 1997, p. 285). Prior to the Arab Spring, the agenda for the development of women's rights in Tunisia was coopted by the state government to complement its own political priorities. As it stands, a majority of scholars have attributed the development of women's rights in Tunisia to the rise of state feminism post independence and the Islamist-secular interactions in the country that have both powerfully shaped the development of women's rights in Tunisia (Zeghal, 2019, pp. 255 – 256). While these factors have indeed shaped the course of women's rights in the country, especially from independence to the early 2000's period, we observe a shift leading into the Arab Spring period (2010 onwards) in terms of how women's rights advocates present their issues nationally and coordinate their engagement with transnational advocacy networks (TANs).

In order to fully understand the significance of this shift within the women's rights movement, this thesis compares two different periods in Tunisia: from 1956 to 2009, and 2010 to 2020. This thesis argues that policy and legislative changes related to women Arab Spring onwards have been the outcome of women's rights organizations participating in transnational advocacy networking to connect their struggles to a broader universalist human rights framework that transcends the Islamist-secular dichotomy. The overarching question my research will address is, **“Has the engagement between Tunisian women's rights organizations and transnational advocacy networks (TAN) Arab Spring onwards shaped the development of women's rights in Tunisia?”** This thesis examines these interactions between Tunisian women organizations and TANs through documentary research of primary documents and

secondary sources to trace networking processes and identify thematic patterns in terms of how Tunisian women's rights organizers frame their issues within a transnational context. Furthermore, this thesis identifies the ways local Tunisian women organizations are informed by and engage with the broader goals and strategies of TANs regionally and internationally. This thesis hypothesizes that the role of TANs in informing and shaping local initiatives by Tunisian women organizations has been imperative in creating intersectional discourses and broadening the scope of issues within the arena of women's rights in the country. Consequently, this has impacted the civil society landscape in Tunisia and is part of a broader outcome of global feminist networks.

## **1.2. A Brief History of the Development of Women's Rights in Tunisia**

In 1956 The Code of Personal Status (CPS) was enacted in Tunisia. The CPS abolished polygamy, developed a legal framework for women to seek divorce, declared a minimum legal age for marriage, and ensured that both spouses entered marriage consensually. Following that, on June 1, 1959, the first Tunisian Constitution was declared, and in it stated that 'all citizens have equal rights and duties and are equal before the law' (article 6). In the midst of these changes, women in Tunisia saw new legislative developments that enabled the possibility of new personal freedoms and democratic rights that spurred the birth of many women's rights associations and organizations, eventually mobilizing women's rights pioneers to take up civil society and political spaces. In short, the independence period in Tunisia had a significant impact on how women's rights would be conceptualized and developed.

Following Tunisia's independence and the introduction of the CPS, the tension between Islamism and women's rights has proven to become a contentious politicized issue in the country (Marks, 2012). The recent decades have seen extensive scholarship on the secular-Islamist divide and the implications of that divide on the advancement of women's rights in Tunisia (Stepan, 2012). Tunisia is often viewed as a secular country; yet the historical roots of Islam and Islamist movements can be traced back prior to the country's independence (Wolf, 2017). Consequently, there has always been a powerful religious trend that has existed alongside Tunisia's secular currents (Wolf, 2017). The reforms that were initiated by Habib Bourguiba following Tunisia's independence were framed as a new phase in Islamic advancement, rather than as a departure from Islam

itself. Despite these efforts, not all these reforms were entirely supported by local Islamic clerics and traditionalist Tunisian society at the time. The literature indicates that this divide between secular affiliations and religious affiliations was deepening 1960's onwards, and this divide significantly influenced the different layers of political life and social life in Tunisia (Charrad, 1997).

However, the recent political developments from 2010 onwards are of particular interest as they capture a developing shift in Tunisian civil society, transcending the polarized secular-religious dichotomy towards broader global trends of democratic participatory citizenship to align with universal human rights standards. In conjunction with that, we have seen since 2010 a new form of politics inaugurated, representing a transformation from authoritarian politics towards democratic politics, and this has significantly informed the ways laws and policies related to women in Tunisia have developed. Reflecting this shift, women's rights organizations are connecting their issues not only to local internal discourses, but also to broader relevant global trends and universal norms around women's rights. This shift has reflected in the ways local women's rights organizations have aligned themselves to broader goals and objectives of women's TANs and groups, both regionally and internationally.

### **1.3. Tunisian Women's Civil Society Organizing and Transnational Networking**

These two different periods in Tunisia (independence period and Arab Spring period), capture the evolving dynamics between secularism and religion, while weaving in more recent global trends towards democratic participatory citizenship and universal human rights. This recent shift is exemplified through the work of secular associations like the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (ATFD) seeking to establish deeper gender equality for women in the country through cooperative partnerships and networking with international governmental organizations (IGO) like the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), and other NGOs like the International Civil Society Action Network (ICSAN), pushing towards policy and legislative reform. For example, Aswat Nissa a local women's civil society organization (CSO) conducts research and advocacy work on the issues facing women in the country, while collaborating with other regional non-profit organizations like the Euro-

Mediterranean Women's Foundation to bring together resources and networking opportunities for women's organizations in the region.

Concurrently, at present an increasing number of women who are strongly affiliated with different Islamic centered associations and CSOs are also engaging and representing women's rights issues in the public arena. These women's organizations often engage Islam as a bridge towards informal and formal channels of politics and civil society action. Similarly, women centered Islamic organizations are also appealing to the broader global climate of democratic citizenship rights and universal human rights. For example, in August 2011 women's groups and activists from various different political and religious affiliations led a united sit-in together near the Prime Ministers' Council. This joint collaborative effort eventually led these women's organizations to participate in forums hosted by the UN Women towards the adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) after Tunisia's many years of reservations. Tunisia thus became the first country in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region to remove specific reservations of CEDAW (Hursh, 2017, pp. 305).

#### **1.4. Legislative Reforms and Women's Rights**

Tunisia is well known for historically promoting women's rights in the country's legal and state structure. As a result, the country is often viewed as unique from other MENA states. In 2014, Tunisia's second constitution was formally established, expanding the legal protections for Tunisian women and emphasizing the importance of prioritizing the development of women's rights in the country. As discussed earlier, scholarship on the topic tends to focus on the apparent contradiction between being an Islamic state and developing women's rights. However, despite some truth to this narrative, in recent years the focus of these diverse women's rights associations and CSOs in Tunisia has been to unite towards calls for further legislative and policy reform that adhere to international laws and human rights standards. This shift is important given the long historical divide between Islamists and secularists in the country, indicating that globalizing trends such as networking, building broader inclusive communications, and ideas of democratic participation have begun to establish roots in Tunisia.

## 1.5. Conceptualization of Key Terms

In this study, women's advocacy groups are defined as special interest groups, mainly CSOs, non-profit organizations, and associations focussed specifically on policy and legislative reform pertaining to the development of women's rights in Tunisia (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Transnational advocacy networks (TAN) will be defined as a set of relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and a dense exchange of information and services (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). The Arab Spring period will encompass the events and developments from 2010 to 2020. It is also important note that in a study focussed on understanding the development of women's rights there is a risk of presuming agreement about which laws protect women's rights and are in the best interest of women. The enacting of a law intending to secure women's rights does not necessarily mean that the interests of all women are secured, as 'women' are problematic as a category: their interests vary and depend on factors such as class, ethnicity, age, education, and location. They also vary according to the domain, e.g. at the workplace, in politics, in the family, or the financial realm. Moreover, understandings of what is in the best interest of women change. In consideration of that, women's rights in Tunisia will be gauged through political, economic and social developments that impact the lived realities of women.

The terms "Islamists" and "secularists" also require further explanation. The term "Islamist" is understood within the political arena of Tunisia to identify political parties and actors that advocate for Islamic principles to be implemented in the governance and management of state affairs and systems. Secularism on the other hand is often aligned with Western positivist ideals, most importantly laicity, the separation of the state and religion. When analyzing political debates in the MENA region authors tend to categorize actors along these lines. When the debate concerns women's rights, authors often replace the term "secularists" with "feminists." This binary is at least partly a legacy of the authoritarian regimes; it is a pillar of anti-Islamist state propaganda, which divided society along the lines of positive ('progressive' feminists/secularists) and negative ('backwards' Islamists). This tendency to divide Tunisian society into Islamists and secularists is reductive and does not reflect reality, often imposing political views upon actors with which they do not identify. Although the Islamist-secular divide has had real impact on the political landscape of Tunisia, it is important to understand that secularists

are not necessarily feminists, and feminists can be Islamists, namely individuals who lobby for the protection of women's rights within an Islamic framework.

## **1.6. Theoretical Approach**

The theoretical foundation for this thesis is rooted in a constructivist perspective. Contrary to classical approaches, a constructivist perspective disassociates itself from primarily analyzing state behaviour and instead focuses its analysis on the interactions between individuals (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). Constructivists argue that social identities are not fixed, but rather these identities develop over a period of time, evolving during interactive processes, regardless of whether those interactions are cooperative or conflicting (Wendt, 1992, pp. 391- 392). The constructivists worldview asserts that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature (Jackson & Sørensen, 2007). Most importantly, constructivists emphasize that the construction of meaning occurs through these different interactions (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). One key argument for the construction of meaning is the existence of networks. Networks establish broad connections, build solidarity, reinforce ideas and values, while acting as a strengthening resource to local CSOs and social movements in general.

Considering this network perspective, this thesis asserts that for Tunisian women organizations to be contemporary and well informed on issues relating to women's rights, these organizations actively seek out other like-minded regional and international organizations to connect with. This creates regional and international links that reinforce and give meaning to the goals, strategies and actions these women's organizations take in furthering the status of women through policy and legislative means.

## **1.7. Method of Data Collection**

This thesis will employ documentary research and discourse analysis methods of research using both primary and secondary sources to explore my research question. Using a documentary method of research I intend to identify trends related to the development of women rights in Tunisia and to identify the ways local Tunisian women organizations network, collaborate and engage with TANs regionally and internationally,

specifically on the question of how these interactions shape their goals and strategies. This thesis will use primary documents and sources to build an outline that will identify a timeline that corresponds with the developments in the area of women's rights in the country, and to extract instances between local women organizations and TANs of collaboration, exchanges, referencing, skill sharing, mentorship acknowledgments, affiliations and commentary related to women's rights issues and human rights standards.

## **1.8. Limitations of Study**

An obvious limitation to this study was my limited language capacity. Although there was a wealth of literature and data on the topic that was available in English, my limited Arabic language capacity and my inability to understand the French language posed some obvious and important disadvantages in terms of the breadth of data that was accessible to me. Aside from that, the question of representation of the other is also an equally important issue especially when researching post-colonial situations. Initially I had intended to engage in fieldwork and conduct in person interviews with Tunisian women. Due the Covid-19 pandemic and my own physical condition I was not able to carry out ethnographic research and instead primarily relied on documentary methods of research and discourse analysis of primary and secondary sources of data.

Although wrought with complexity, as a researcher I had to continuously question my own Eurocentric understanding of concepts such as agency, Islamist and progress. At the beginning of this research, I relied on perceptions and a general understanding of what those terms meant and how it would potentially manifest in my research. In the midst of conducting my literature review of the development of women's rights in Tunisia I found myself disoriented by some Tunisian women's antagonistic battles for meanings of those very terms. Tunisian scholars like Khadija Arfoui displayed what I had taken to be initially a Eurocentric understanding of Islamist women as submissive and manipulated by patriarchal norms. After positioning myself carefully to be non-judgemental of the different forms of agency displayed by different actors, I found it difficult not to dismiss the opinions of both the Islamist or secular women. In fact, by carefully analyzing the positions of those actors, whose lives had previously been impacted by their activism, through my learning of the political history of Tunisia and how secular organisations were supported by the regime as a polar force to the Islamist

opposition, I understood both positions to be contextual and local. Nevertheless, regardless of how I positioned my views, those views were always going to be that of an outsider. As I completed the literature review, I realized that the initial perceptions I had of what these terms meant were not completely accurate or representative of the complexity that these terms held within them. This gap in my own understanding and the process of my own learning afterwards in this area is reflected in how I framed the analysis for this thesis.

Another limitation to note is that the spectrum of Tunisian women represented in the data is mildly skewed as there are only two sources of data that represent the voices of rural women. There are also no Indigenous identified women in my data, neither are there queer or transwomen and their issues discussed in the data. A majority of the data is focussed on women CSO activists, politicians, and within that I equally represent the voices of both Islamist and secular leaning women. It was not possible to include all of the documents collected for the study into the findings. Nevertheless, the empirical evidence gathered and exhibited in this thesis makes a significant contribution to the knowledge of Tunisia's women's engagement with TANs and its impact on the development of women's rights in the country.

## **1.9. Thesis Organization**

This thesis explores the development of women's rights in Tunisia from 1956 to 2009 during the post-independence period, and will focus on the development of women's rights from 2010 to 2020 during the Arab Spring period. Chapter one presents an overview of the topic and identifies the research question, the methodology, the theoretical framework and the scope of the research. Chapter two will review the pertinent literature relevant to the research topic, presenting an in-depth review of the development of women's rights in Tunisia from the independence period to the Arab Spring period. Chapter three will begin by presenting the theoretical framework guiding this research and then transition into a detailed discussion on the theories employed for the analysis of the data. Chapter four will focus on the methodology and key findings of the data. Chapter five will conclude the research, identify gaps in the study and discuss the potential for future research.

## **Chapter 2.**

# **The Development of Women's Rights in Tunisia**

## **2.1. Identifying the Literature**

Over the last forty years the literature on the development of women's rights in Tunisia has been primarily focused on two main areas. The first area explores state feminism in Tunisia and its impact on the women's rights agenda post independence (Charrad, 1997). The second area focuses on Islamists-secular politics that over time impacted the scope and direction of women's rights issues in the country (Feldman, 2015). This chapter reviews these two factors contributing to the development of women's rights in Tunisia and reveals opportunities for theoretical exploration later in the paper's analysis on the impact of the Tunisian Arab Spring on the women's rights movement. This critical review demonstrates the relevance of these explanations to effectively gauge the evolution and changes that have taken place within the last few decades in the arena of women's rights in Tunisia. These explanatory factors, although vital in contextualizing the development of women's rights in Tunisia after independence, does not fully capture emerging trends in terms of how Tunisian women CSOs since the Arab Spring relate to the state and engage with their networks (local, regional and international) or the ways these organizations develop their goals and strategies.

## **2.2. State Feminism and Women's Rights**

The literature on state feminism is extensive and there are various case studies detailing the ways different state governments have attempted to co-opt women's rights as part of their foreign policy and state building initiatives (Charrad, 2001). This form of state-led branding of women's rights is often referred to as state feminism (White, 2007, pp. 146 - 147). State feminism is primarily concerned with women's public emancipation and typically does not concern itself with women's private lives (White, 2007, p. 147). Often, state feminism is viewed as the means of the state to exert political control over the narratives concerning women lives and the ways their rights develop (White, 2007, pp. 147-148). State feminism in Tunisia has had long-term implications on the women's rights movement, and consequently this has shaped perceptions of feminism in the

country. In addition, the influence of the CPS in the legal and constitutional history of post-colonial Tunisia has permanently linked the women's rights movement in Tunisia to the historical legacy of state feminism. In order to specifically understand how women's rights in Tunisia has been impacted by state building agendas, it is necessary to first look at how Tunisian women have entered into its postcolonial context.

Tunisian women had made significant contributions to the country's nationalist struggle for independence following World War II (El-Masri, 2015, p. 125). Women activists like Bchira Ben Mrad actively participated in efforts to liberate their country from the French, and were often arrested along with their male comrades (El-Masri, 2015, p. 125). While these contributions were necessary to achieve independence, Tunisian women quickly found themselves mostly excluded from political life after colonial forces conceded in 1952 and Tunisia gained its independence (El-Masri, 2017, pp. 126 - 127).

Consequently, this political absence adversely impacted the way women's rights issues began to emerge in a newly independent Tunisia (Charrad, 2001, pp. 286 - 288). It is also important to note that during Tunisia's struggle for independence, the competing tension of a strong centralized government and democratic citizenship rights began to emerge (which was then later reconciled) (Charrad, 2001). Similarly, the on and off again inclusion and exclusion of women from this struggle demonstrated the imbalance, unevenness, and at times the contradictory nature of the Tunisian state-building project (Arfaoui, 2007, p. 57 - 58).

### **2.3. The Bourguiba Era**

After Tunisia gained its independence, President Habib Bourguiba enacted several acts to advance women's rights. In 1956, Tunisian women gained formal equal rights in most areas of the law through the CPS (El-Masri, 2015, pp. 126 - 127), and in 1961, Bourguiba introduced a series of laws and policies throughout the country to encourage family planning (pp. 126 -127). These two reforms not only advanced women's rights, but also contributed to a strong Tunisian middle class in the first few decades after independence (Charrad, 2001, pp. 297 - 299). Bourguiba's government was deeply committed to a secular nationalist framework (El-Masri, 2015, pp. 126), and in order for his vision to materialize he needed the participation of half his population, which at the time were women (pp. 126 - 127). Although his government became increasingly authoritarian, Bourguiba nonetheless demonstrated an overall strong commitment to

advancing women's rights through policies and through socioeconomic advancement. Under Bourguiba's leadership laws relating to women's rights were issued in the field of inheritance, family planning, and women's political participation (El-Masri, 2015, pp. 126 - 128). In addition, Bourguiba founded a women's organization (Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes, UNFT) supposedly aimed to voice the interests of women in the country (El-Masri, 2015, p. 127). Bourguiba's government also issued the Labor Code that guaranteed women's equality in opportunities and treatment in matters of work and profession (El-Masri, 2015, p. 129). These laws also extended to the rights of women to education ("Decree 80-954", 1980).

Despite the progressive nature of these initiatives, Tunisian women themselves did not lead these initiatives nor were these changes completely representative of the actual issues women at the time wanted to address (Charrad, 2001, p. 241). Under Bourguiba's regime all feminist activities needed to be approved through channels controlled by the state itself, and independent feminist NGOs were discouraged if not banned, for organizing without the approval of the state (El-Masri, 2015). This was mainly because Bourguiba wanted to be seen as the sole advocate and liberator for women's rights in the country (El-Masri, 2015, p. 126), and consequently many important women figures like Bechira Ben Mrad were marginalized and silenced (p.127). Mounira Charrad in her work on Tunisian state feminism argues that a mostly urban-based political elite developed in relative autonomy from rural and tribal kin groupings post independence (Charrad, 2001). Moreover, the Tunisian state in the 1950s through the 1960s engaged intensely in a broad range of policies meant to eliminate what was left of tribal solidarities in politics (Charrad, 2001, p. 238). This is important to note because rural Tunisian women that were part of these tribal groups were often deliberately excluded from representing their issues within the women's rights arena at the time (Charrad, 2001). Yet despite these accounts, many have dubbed the actions of the Tunisian state in 1956 as revolutionary and feminist. However, it is important to distinguish between the driving force behind these legal and policy changes at the time and how these changes appear to us today in the context of contemporary debates around state building approaches in the region. It is true that these reforms were bold, but that does not necessarily mean that feminist concerns prompted them. The reality is that a feminist framework of action did not exist in the 1950s in Tunisia, nor was feminist discourse allowed to enter the political arena of Tunisia at the time (Charrad, 2001). Moreover, a

closer look at these reforms reveal that there were other dominant factors such as the Tunisian state's agenda to appear "modern" and compliant with Western democratic trends that thrust forward these changes towards outcomes that were not primarily concerned with gender equality itself. Furthermore, Bourguiba's pursuit of state feminism was not exclusive to Tunisia at the time. The Turkish Republic led by Kemal Ataturk in the 1920's had also fashioned its development and pursuit of "modernization" similarly (White, 2003, pp. 149 - 151). Ataturk was determined to distance the Turkish Republic from its Islamic and cultural identity associated with the Ottoman era (p. 149), enforcing a ban on headscarves in all educational and governmental institutions, accelerating urban migration, and encouraging women into the workforce (White, 2003, pp. 149 - 159). Ataturk's government also encouraged women into professional educational programs and replaced Islamic law with a secular civil code in 1926 effectively giving women equal civil rights (White, 2003, pp. 149 -150). In 1923, a group of women organizers formally requested authorization from the Turkish Republic to found a Republican Women's Party. Their request was refused on the grounds that a woman's party would distract from the Republican People's Party that state leaders were establishing (White, 2003). Thus, state feminism even in the case of the Turkish Republic had essentially monopolized women's activism and manipulated women's issues as a tool of the state's modernizing project.

At least until the late 1970s the women's movement and the civil society sphere in Tunisia were for the most part dormant (Charrad, 2001). However, beginning in the late 1970s Tunisia's civil society sphere was beginning to transform (Charrad, 2001). In 1976 the Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LTDH) was founded and finally obtained its license from the government on May 7, 1977 (Arfaoui, 2007). The LTDH was initially founded by a group of lawyers, intellectuals and journalists to ensure that Tunisia observed the articles enshrined within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (Arfaoui, 2007). Tunisian women during this period were also beginning to actively seek opportunities to participate in women's organizing and feminist centered discussions (El-Masri, 2015). This led to the founding of clubs and other civic organizations focused on women's development (El-Masri, 2015). In 1978 for example, a group of students, later joined by lawyers, academics and journalists, created the Tahar Al Haddad Club to study the status of women and to advocate for women's active participation in the economic and cultural development of their country (El-Masri, 2015).

Zine Al-Abidine Bin Ali (Ben Ali) assumed the presidential office in 1987 (El-Masri, 2015), introducing himself as a president that was determined to reform the old bureaucratic structures of the Bourguiba regime (El-Masri, 2015).

## **2.4. The Ben Ali Era**

In his first year as president Ben Ali abolished the presidency-for-life system, granted amnesty to thousands of political prisoners (after abolishing the state security court), signed the Convention against Torture, and reformed laws governing detention (El-Masri-2015, pp. 130 -131). Furthermore, Ben Ali also endorsed new legislation that made processes to form associations and parties much more accessible (El-Masri, 2015). In 1988, Ben Ali's regime had decided to sponsor a National Pact involving all the major actors in the country, including some feminist associations in order to appeal to its western affiliates and to reinforce the significance of the CPS (El-Masri, 2015). In many ways, Ben Ali's government renewed the state's commitment towards state feminism, advancing the scope of women's rights throughout the 1990s (El-Masri, 2015). During this period, measures were taken to increase the presence of women in education, with a specific focus on access to education for women in rural areas in the country (El-Masri, 2015). In 1993 Ben Ali's government established a special Ministry for Women and Family Affairs and concurrently supported legislation to increase the minimum age of marriage to 18 for both genders (El-Masri, 2015). In 1989, feminist organizations like the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD) and the Tunisian Association of the Democratic Women (ATFD) were founded (Arfaoui, 2007). Perhaps the key development during Ben Ali's presidency was that the political representation of women was considerably higher in comparison to the other states in the region at the time (El-Masri, 2015).

The ATFD and AFTURD became the main women's organizations in Tunisia to introduce a feminist framework and to actively engage women to participate politically towards further policy and legal reform (Marks, 2013). However, in order to be legally recognized in the country both organizations were strictly bound to their relationship with Ben Ali's government and state mandated programs (Marks, 2013). The authoritarian nature of Ben Ali's regime made open contestation challenging and only state appointed institutions had the authority to publically address the issue of women's rights (Voorhoeve, 2015). The reason for these strict limitations was that the women's rights

discourse was vital in maintaining the appearance of Tunisia as a democratic state (Marks, 2013), when in fact Tunisia was increasingly under authoritarian rule (Voorhoeve, 2015). Additionally, under Ben Ali the protection of women's rights became an essential legitimizing tool at the national and international level to silence these independent women's organizations (Marks, 2013). The repression of these organizations took on various forms. For instance, while Ben Ali granted the ATFD and AFTURD legal status, they were consistently censored (El-Masri, 2015), the police often harassed their members, and financial establishments consistently hindered funding when they had opted to pursue their own programs and agendas (Voorhoeve, 2015). Ben Ali, in a similar fashion to his predecessor essentially ensured that all these women's organizations, the largest of which remained the UNFT, were allied to his party whether by means of cooptation or coercion and none of these women's organizations could legally function without the formal recognition and support of the Tunisian state (Voorhoeve, 2015). The organizations that managed legal recognition found themselves working in a civil society sphere controlled by state-sponsored women's organizations or party-affiliated associations.

## **2.5. Women's Rights and the Islamist-Secular Dichotomy**

Over the years, the tension between Islamism and women's rights in Tunisia has proven to become an increasingly contentious issue within the realm of political debate (Marks, 2012). The term Islamism itself does not specify what vision of Islamic order or *Shari'a* are being advocated for, or how their advocates intend to bring them about (Gray, 2012). Hence, it is important to situate our understanding of Islamists in Tunisia in context of the country's long history with Islam and subsequently the development of political Islam in the country (Gray, 2012). Islamists in Tunisia are as varied and diverse in their goals, approaches, and affiliations as secular identified groups are (Gray, 2012).

The Islamist movement in Tunisia began in the 1960s and was originally inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. Ennahda is one of the oldest Islamist movements in North Africa founded by Rachid Ghannouchi and Abdel Fattah Mouou (Gray, 2012). It was established as a political association under the name of *Mouvement de la tendance islamique*, or Movement of Islamist Tendency. In 1989 it was renamed Hizb al-Nahda, and commonly referred to as An-Nahda or Ennahda (renaissance or awakening) because the former President had banned any political organization with a religious

reference in its name (Gray, 2012). Despite the name change An-Nahda was banned as well, and in 1992 its entire leadership was jailed, as were many members while others went into self-exposed exile, most notably its leader Rachid Ghannouchi who spent nearly two decades exiled abroad (Gray, 2012). Those who managed to stay out of prison went underground because the government declared it an illegal organization. In the wake of the January 2011 uprising the ban was lifted and Rachid Ghannouchi made a triumphant return to Tunis shortly after Ben Ali fled the country (Gray, 2012). Upon his return the party reconstituted itself and made its formal entry into the Tunisian political scene once again. Therefore, in the wake of the popular uprising, secularists and Islamists have had to come to terms with their past privileges and injustices. Despite individual persecution, secular groups generally were more likely to receive state support for women's rights issues, while most Islamists were persecuted, jailed, forced underground or exiled (Gray, 2012). It is true that the long-standing fear of rising Islamist patriarchy has been the focus of many secular political actors in the country, however this focus has often silenced Islamist women and their contributions to the development of women's rights (Marks, 2013).

It is within this context we can fully grasp the impact of Islamist-secular interactions on the development of women's rights in Tunisia. Charrad in her commentary on state feminism emphasizes two important dimensions that explain the Islamists-secular divide. First, state feminism was an aggressive top-down restructuring ratified even before the formulation of an electoral system (Charrad, 2001). She argues that conservative political groups defeated in the anticolonial struggle did not have the political influence to hinder these reforms that were not aligned with their interpretation of Islamic law (Charrad, 2001). Consequently nation-building in Tunisia did not include the voices of all its political actors and occurred without any real contestation of power. Secondly, the question of women's rights intensified the dichotomy between the state and opposition Islamists, subsequently furthering the divide between secularist and Islamists organizers (Charrad, 2001). Most women's rights activists in Tunisia both before and after the 2011 revolution believed that laws regarding women should be defended against Islamists regardless of the paternalistic and authoritarian nature of the state (Marks, 2013). Monica Marks in her work on Islamism and women's rights in Tunisia argues that Islamist women have rarely been seen as legitimate actors, when in fact their unique position as women that inhabit the intersections between religion, politics and gender should be given more importance when engaging in discourses addressing the issue of women's rights in the country

(Marks, 2013). Furthermore, although infrequent, there have been instances of solidarity between Islamist women and secular feminists on issues pertaining to the gender wage gap, women's political participation and gender based violence (GBV) especially during the Arab Spring period (Zaki, 2019). Despite the apparent contradictions between the two feminist camps, both sides during the revolution shared a common desire to reclaim ownership of the women's rights agenda. After decades of state-sponsored feminism, Tunisian women's organizations no longer face top-down constraints in terms of organizing and mobilizing. This renewed freedom of association in the aftermath of the Tunisian revolution has generated an explosion of new women's associations (Zaki, 2019). Some of these new women's associations, namely those led by new veiled actors, have chosen to work from within the Islamic framework (Marks, 2013). These new associations have adopted a frame of reference that does not fully align with the previous state-sponsored or secular feminist framework. Moreover, many Islamist women have also taken on a more prominent role in politics and have stepped into elected positions on Tunisia's Constitutional Assembly. These women are aligned with the Ennahada party and advocate for women's rights referencing a Qur'anic framework as the foundation of their organizing (Marks, 2013). However, many secular feminists continue to be explicitly against the involvement of Islamist women in shaping the women's rights agenda in the country (Marks, 2013). According to them, Islamist women are backwards and have been used as a tool by the patriarchal conservative Ennahada party to gain the support of women (Debuysere, 2015). This view of Islamist women as backwards is problematic, as it not only isolates their participation and voices from the broader discourse around women's rights issues, but it also ignores their agency as women in contributing independently to political issues concerning women in the country (Debuysere, 2015).

Ennahda remains a powerful political force, helping to form a coalition government in 2015 and is since 2019 the largest party in Tunisia's new parliament. From 2011 to 2014, during the troika government's tenure, Ennahda was pressured to make a few critical compromises in accepting the framework of a secular democracy for the sake of a successful political transition (Grewal, 2020). The first, perhaps the most important, was to not include in the 2014 constitution a reference to *Shari'a*, or Islamic law, as the basis of legislation (Grewal, 2020). Such a clause would have directly limited popular sovereignty in crafting legislation, contradicting democratic norms. Early in the transition, Rached Ghannouchi, the head of Ennahda assured Tunisia's secularists and the international community that the first article of the constitution regarding Arabic as the

official language and Islam as the official state religion would be left as is; and there was to be no other references to religion in the constitution (Grewal, 2020). When Ennahda members were made aware of this, some members within the party were not in agreement with Ghannouchi. In the spring of 2012, conservative firebrands Habib Ellouze and Sadok Chourou, both of whom had spent much of the last two decades in Tunisian prisons, forced an internal debate on the matter (Grewal, 2020). The debate was protracted, reinforcing fears among Tunisia's secularists that Ennahda harboured a hidden, fundamentalist agenda (Marks, 2014). Although Ennahda's conservative wing lost that round, they had not given up. When it came time to draft the new constitution, they introduced amendment 42 to article 1, which would have added to the constitution's first article in which it states that the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah* are the main sources of Tunisia's legislation. If a reference to the *Shari'a* had been ruled out, perhaps a reference to the sources of the *Shari'a*—the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*—could gain enough votes (Grewal, 2020). When it came up for a vote in January 2014, Ennahda MPs were unexpectedly divided. Twenty-two of 89 Ennahda MPs voted for this amendment, whereas 38 stuck to the party line, which was to abstain (Grewal, 2020). Twelve were absent during the vote, whereas another 17 voted no. Although the amendment ultimately failed, it generated important and illuminating internal disagreement on the issue of popular v. divine sovereignty (Grewal, 2020). Additional controversies revolved around religious freedom, the second pillar of secularism. Amendment 62 of article 6 was voted down on January 4, 2014 – this would have eliminated the constitution's guarantee to freedom of conscience, commonly interpreted as permitting atheism (Grewal, 2020). As MPs were debating this amendment, Ennahda MP Habib Ellouze called secular MP Mongi Rahoui an enemy of Islam (Grewal, 2020), prompting secularists to introduce a new amendment to article 6 prohibiting "takfir" – the labeling of another Muslim as an apostate, a religious incitement to violence (Grewal, 2020). This amendment passed on January 5, 2014. The Ennahda MPs was considerably divided on both of these votes as well.

In the midst of this highly polarized context, Tunisia nonetheless has been able to achieve some important gains for women nine years into the revolution. Post-uprising Tunisia decided to lift all reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and embraced gender parity in the 2011 and 2014 electoral law (Debuysere, 2015). Furthermore, it promulgated a new constitution

that was hailed as the most progressive legislation on women's rights in the Arab region. The new Tunisian constitution, which was a product of a difficult and pragmatic consensus between Islamist and secular political parties in the Constituent Assembly, provides for gender equality in rights and responsibilities and commits to attaining parity in all elected assemblies (art. 46). This victory was partly due to the months of lobbying, campaigning and reaching out by women activists and organizers with the intention of forming strategic alliances across ideological and institutional divides to secure the rights of women in the new constitution (Zaki, 2019). Ennahda's cooperation and willingness to negotiate with these women's organizations regarding the details of these articles was also beneficial to Ennahda's public image as a moderate democratic Islamic party that was inclusive of its women constituents (Zaki, 2019). Yet, despite these brief instances of co-negotiations and mutual dialogue, co-operation between secular women's rights organizers and their new Islamist-inspired counterparts have been rare (Zaki, 2019). This is not surprising since these women to varying extents have different agendas and approaches in their quest for women's rights. The secular women's movements in Tunisia that have benefitted from state legitimacy and international recognition, continue to struggle to accommodate Islamist women's rights actors. Since both Islamists and secularists play a fundamental role in the development of women's rights in Tunisia, mutual cooperation and strategic coalition building could strengthen democratic processes and help build broader networking opportunities that could strengthen the women's rights movement in Tunisia.

## Chapter 3.

### Theoretical Approach

#### 3.1. A Conceptual Framework

In recent years, the study of transnational non-state actors has established itself in the field of international relations (IR) (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Considering our increasingly globalized world of interconnected states and societies, we observe the emergence of cross border advocacy and solidarity which are best exemplified by women's diverse identities, political motivations and transnational forms of collective mobilization. Yet, this process is not tethered to the weakening of previous systemic imbalances and forms of governance (Labidi, 2007). Boundaries based on contemporary forms of membership, such as citizenship and territoriality, although continuously shifting, evidently shape women's agendas and reinforce the unequal access to resources that women continue to experience within a local and international context (Labidi, 2007, pp. 7 -9). Thus, transnational alliances and political agendas have emerged, while at the same time new structures of power come into existence. This chapter explores the relationship between feminist movements in Tunisia and transnational advocacy linkages to locate its impact within the women's rights arena in country. To facilitate this exploration of the relationship between feminist movements and transnational advocacy networks (TANs), this chapter will draw from the works of constructivists and of social movement theorists in both IR theory and comparative politics. It will employ a constructivist theoretical framework as presented by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink in their book *Activists Beyond Borders* (Keck & Sikkink, 1999), Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink's two articles *Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics* (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001) and *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change* (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), and will utilize Sidney Tarrow's work in *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Tarrow, 2011).

As outlined, the theoretical approach employed in this chapter draws upon sociological foundations that focus on complex relations among actors on the intersubjective construction of meanings, and on the negotiation and variability of identities and interests. Critics of constructivism (realist and neorealist) often argue that ideas and

interactions only play a minor role in determining behaviour and outcomes. Furthermore, these scholars argue that states within the international system are the only actors that matter in IR (Wendt, 1992). While state analyses are important, this thesis intends to broaden the scope of analysis to focus on international interactions of mainly non-state actors in the form of networks. The networks this chapter focuses on participate concurrently in both domestic and international politics, drawing upon a variety of resources.

### **3.2. Constructivism and Transnational Advocacy Networks**

In Alexander Wendt's *Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics* (Wendt, 1992), the author contends that the Neorealist model in which interests are unvarying and dictated by exogenous factors such as anarchy proves to be unrealistic. Structural realism (neorealism) holds that the nature of the international structure is defined by its ordering principle (anarchy), units of the system (states), and by the distribution of capabilities (Waltz, 2004, pp. 3-5). This framework holds that the anarchic ordering principle of the international structure is decentralized and pre-determined, meaning there is no formal principal authority, instead states act to secure their own interest and will not subordinate their interest to the interests of other states (Waltz, 2004, pp. 3-5). Wendt essentially concludes that the Neoliberal model is weak because it does not seek to acknowledge change, viewing interests as predetermined hence failing to account for the real dynamics of change and the complex acquisition of knowledge to inform our understanding of the international system. Constructivists assert that social identities are not fixed, but rather these identities develop over a period of time, evolving during interactive processes, regardless of whether those interactions are cooperative or conflicting (Wendt, 1992, pp. 393-394). Unlike other IR theories, Constructivist argue that state identities are not predetermined by intangible concepts such as anarchy, but rather are complex and variable depending on a state's perception of itself, other states' perceptions of it, and the state's perception of other states (Hopf, 1998) and these in turn drive interests. Constructivists have focused on the examination of nonmaterial factors such as norms, ideas, knowledge, and culture, stressing in particular on the role played by "collectively held or intersubjective ideas and understanding on social life" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, p. 393). At the most general

level, constructivism is an approach to social analysis based on the following basic assumptions:

1. Human interaction is not shaped by material factors, but primarily by ideational ones (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).
2. The most significant ideational factors are intersubjective beliefs as shared collective understanding (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).
3. These beliefs construct the actors' identities and interests (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).

Accordingly, the significance and value of constructivism in the study of IR lie in the emphasis on both the ontological reality of intersubjective knowledge and the epistemological implications of this reality. Essentially, for Constructivists, IR is made up of social facts, which can exist only through human interactions. Additionally, Constructivists are also invested in studying unconventional forms of power, like those demonstrated by nonstate actors who employ information sharing and strategic framing of an issue to impact policies (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, pp. 393 -395). Constructivism does not disregard traditional material power, but instead expands our understanding of it by examining how the power of exchanging knowledge and putting it into practice inform IR (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001; Wendt, 1992). Wendt's original theory of constructivism has often been criticized for being too narrowly focussed on individualistic analyses, in contrast to the work of scholars like Ludwig Wittgenstein who argued through systemic analytical research that language could accurately represent experience, and thus a focus on the use of everyday forms of language instead is vital in understanding how social norms, ideas and meanings are constructed (Palan, 2000).

More recently, constructivists have also offered new insights concerning the role of nonstate actors and strategic agency. This research is predominantly focused on the deliberate actions of individuals and groups who attempt to change existing norms and rules in the sphere of politics or to create new norms with the potential to influence norm leaders (states, IGOs) or regional governmental institutions) to embrace new norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; 2001). Norm influence may be understood as a three-stage process. The first stage is norm emergence, the second stage involves broad norm acceptance, and the third stage involves internalization (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, pp.

984 -985). This “life cycle” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 985) according to Finnemore and Keck is important for researchers to understand because different social processes and logics of action may be involved at different stages in the process of disseminating norms (pp. 985 -986). Thus, the authors assert that at each stage change is characterized by different actors, motives and mechanisms of influence. The characteristic mechanism of the first stage, norm emergence, is persuasion by norm entrepreneurs (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Norm entrepreneurs attempt to convince a critical mass of states (norm leaders) to embrace new norms.

As an illustration, Keck and Sikkink highlight the increasingly crucial role of nonstate actors in international politics, distinguishing these activists whose formation is motivated by ethical ideas or values from economic actors and firms (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, pp. 19 - 21). These nonstate actors function as norm entrepreneurs, intent on influencing state agendas and policies that impact a particular issue arena (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). The authors call these actors transnational advocacy networks (TANs), a collective of actors organizing and working internationally on an issue, who are tied together by shared values, a common discourse, and complex exchanges of information and resources. Keck and Sikkink refer to these transnational actors as “networks” rather than civil society or groups to stress the structured dimension in the organizing of these complex bodies (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 20). The rise of TANs according to Keck and Sikkink (1999), is an emerging and transformative phenomenon of our increasingly globalized world. In their other volume *Activists Beyond Borders* (Keck & Sikkink, 1999), the authors examine human rights advocacy networks in Latin America, environmental advocacy networks in Malaysia and the relatively new emergence of advocacy networks focussed on violence against women. Keck and Sikkink argue that these advocacy networks have had an influence not only on the agendas of their state, but also on the agendas of other states, IGO’s and other nonstate actors such as activist groups and individuals by means of persuasion, socialization, engagement and pressure. In comparison with the earlier focus of women’s advocacy on female circumcision, women’s voting rights and discrimination issues, networks rapidly developed once these activists reframed issues of violence against women (VAW) as a violation of human rights (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Constructivists attempt to understand the operational framework of these TANs and what might contribute to their success. These processes are not easily explained by traditional utilitarian approaches; therefore constructivist

approaches have gained significant prominence within this area of study (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).

### **3.3. Transnational Advocacy Networks and a Global Civil Society**

The expanding literature on globalization and the shifting nature of international relations has provided substantial evidence that an increasingly strong and complex array of international nongovernmental actors and new nongovernmental organizational (NGO) forms is emerging (Mundy & Murphy, 2001). Consequently, the argument that an increasingly influential international architecture is developing in the arena of advocacy has led to significant research on international nongovernmental organizations engaging in transnational advocacy (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Often described as TANs, these organizational entities bring together a broad array of nongovernmental organizations, citizens associations, and trade unions in forms of activism that specifically target global governance institutions utilizing their international visibility to initiate changes at the national levels (Mundy & Murphy, 2001). TANs are commonly portrayed as the foundational structure for the global civil society collective and their influence within international institutions has enabled them to leverage change within the structures of international politics, democratization processes and individual nation states (Mundy & Murphy, 2001). Additionally, these advocacy networks are vital contributors to the incorporation of social and cultural norms that support regional and international processes (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Specifically, the networking function associated with TANs establishes new links between civil society actors, states and international organizations, increasing the frequency of dialogue and engagement. In the human rights arena these advocacy networks make international resources accessible for civil society actors that are involved in social and political domestic struggles (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, pp. 20 -23). In addition, the literature on TANs highlights the norm disseminating character of TANs in policy debates, where they legitimize social problems at the national as well as the international level. Essentially, TANs seek to persuade international and domestic policy makers to accept their policy positions, thus TANs tend to portray themselves as pioneering agitators or “contentious” (Tarrow, 2011, p. 178) actors. These networks often carry out intense, timely, and tactical campaigns in order to publicize issues, disseminate information about their cause, and present new

political and juridical methods of addressing them. Mediating between political engagement and organizational advocacy structures, TANs identify injustice and assign responsibility for it, thus legitimizing collective action and building public support for its preferred solution. Essentially, TANs have two explanatory exemplifications with regard to their function, primarily the influence and real power they have within the international sphere. Some scholars emphasize the density of TANs, their increasing participation in the negotiations, the existence of a global awareness on issues of human rights, environmental rights and gender and peace, factors that led to a decline in the power of states and increased global governance (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; 2001). Realist on the other hand turn to the occurrences of conflict, emphasizing the hierarchies of power between the actors of the international system and point to the lack of representation of these group (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; 2001).

The expansion and influence of these TANs raise two fundamental questions. First, how do these networks work? Second, are they actually successful independent actors in international politics? Addressing the first question, there is a general understanding that TANs work without significant financial resources, instead they use telecommunications and technology to build networks and generate international public interest on particular issues they are invested in (Mundy & Murphy, 2001). For example, these advocacy networks develop prominent campaigns that target international organizations, linking domestic civil society and international groups into collective protests against governments and international organizational policies (Mundy & Murphy, 2001). This approach has been termed by Keck and Sikkink as the boomerang strategy intended to provide domestic civil society movements an additional advantage against their domestic governments (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Hence, these networks have a cumulative impact as interaction amongst them increases; they build broader strategies and a range of actions to mobilize around intersecting collective action frames. This leads us to consider Sidney Tarrow's discussion on transnational contention that can be compared to Keck and Sikkink's discussion on advocacy networks. Tarrow describes transnational coalition as a form of engagement between insiders and outsiders, referring to one of the five forms of transnational contention developing today (Tarrow, 2011). The author defines "contentious politics" as the joining of forces of collective actors in order to confront elites, opponents and authorities to defend certain a cause (Tarrow, 2011, p. 178). He argues that contentious politics is articulated when changes in political

opportunities create incentives for individuals who do not have access to representative institutions to leverage their agency beyond national borders, challenging authorities and their other opponents. Tarrow refers to this as transnational contention, a lengthy and gradual process by which containment actions and their actors begin operating across borders, uniting various activists to different countries that network together to focus on external or international targets. Finally, on the question of whether these TANs are successful in achieving their goals and maintaining their long-term influence, less agreement exists about the impact of these TANs on world politics (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Most scholars agree that their greatest impact observed has been in the spreading of norms, international level agenda setting, and transformation in intergovernmental and governmental discourses. On the other hand, in terms of holding nations and international organizations accountable to new agendas or in achieving deeper democratization of international organizing (which is a key aspect of their agenda) TANs have been less successful within these areas (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Thus, while some scholars have portrayed TANs as the leaders of global civil society, other scholars have raised important questions about the long-term capacities and influence of these advocacy movements (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). Instead, these scholars prefer to view TANs as subdivisions of transnational rather than global networks whose development into an operational global civil society needs to be empirically studied rather than prematurely assumed (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, pp. 22 - 24).

The emergence of transnational civil societies and public spheres, promoted by global forums and international activists around the world, is an outcome of globalization, and yet, at the same time, it contends with the sovereignty of the state and its influence. Indeed, as Keck and Sikkink suggest, global and transnational political mobilization is challenging the basic assumptions that hold contemporary conceptions of political action (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). A macro perspective of this contention blurs the boundaries between domestic and foreign spheres of collective mobilization. The pace at which we are currently globalizing is also reflective in the number of coalitions, networks, advocacy and lobbying organized transnationally. It is in fact true that since the dawn of information technology, the number of TANs have significantly increased and local collective action can have immediate impact globally, reaching distant areas that were previously not possible. The power of states has not been eliminated, but states also do have to adapt to the new dynamics and trends that have come to characterize the

international system; among these, the new formations of activists organized transnationally. These developments pose new challenges to the nature and forms of collective political mobilization, national governance models, and to the global governance framework today (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). The proceeding sections below will discuss examples of data presented thoroughly in Chapter 4 to demonstrate how the theoretical framework presented in this chapter explains the shift and the motivations for Tunisian women's rights organizers to engage in TANs since the Arab Spring period.

### **3.4. Tunisian Women's Rights Advocacy: A Universalist Approach**

In Chapter Five of *Activists Beyond Borders*, Keck and Sikkink trace the development of women's TANs and the most effective strategies employed by these women's networks within the arena of women's rights (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). The authors observed that these women TANs rapidly grew in strength when they framed the issue of violence against women as a universal human rights concern. Previous emphasis on female genital mutilation (FGM), suffrage, discrimination, and equality had never been able to garner such attention or results. Keck and Sikkink conceptualize framing as "conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimize and motivate collective action" (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, pp. 183). Once these women activists collectively reframed the issue in terms of a universal human rights issue, several changes followed. First, Keck and Sikkink argue that framing women's rights as human rights allow women's rights activists to take advantage of the fact that states already recognize the normative value of human rights, therefore if activists convince them that women's rights are an outcome of human rights, persuading them to ensure women's rights should not be difficult (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 20). Additionally, the framing of women's rights as human rights implicitly propagates the idea that women's right should be considered an established norm just like human rights. This is relevant to the context of Tunisia considering the role of the state historically in promoting women's rights (Charrad, 2001). The Tunisian state has always realized the benefits of using the women's rights issue as a signifier of its commitment to human rights in general. The intentions of the state at that time are of course questionable considering the impact of state feminism on Tunisian women activists and organizers. Nevertheless, to some extent Tunisian women post-independence benefited

from the CPS that took its legitimacy from the universality of law. Following the Jasmine Revolution in 2011, Tunisian women have been striving to resuscitate the history of women's formal political participation in the struggles against colonialism pre-independence in order to give the CPS and the women's movement in Tunisia a unique origin within the context of a universalist feminist and human rights framework (El-Masri, 2015). Today, Tunisian women activists and politicians continue to engage the state highlighting the connection between women's rights and human rights, while at the same time building the women's right arena outside of the confines of state control and oppression. Secondly, Keck and Sikkink argue that framing a women's rights issue as a human rights violation allows activists to overcome local, regional, cultural and ethnic differences, thus avoiding the criticism that women's rights are merely based in Western foreign values (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). For example, earlier campaigns against FGM met intense resistance, claiming that efforts to stop the practice were an extension of cultural imperialism. However, Keck and Sikkink explain that placing this practice under the category of rape and domestic abuse defused cultural criticisms and legitimized opposition to FGM. Similarly, Tunisian women advocating for deeper gender equality in the country are also pursuing strategies that equate the issues of gender equality to the universal issue of human rights. For example, the Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalite (CME) a regional feminist organization led jointly by Tunisian, Moroccan and Algerian women, frequently publish briefs and reports on the issue of gender equality within the context of family law in the Maghreb. The excerpt below is from the introduction of a 2014 CME report titled *Equality in Family Law & Economic Autonomy of Women*. Tunisian human rights advocate and activists Alya Chammari wrote the introduction within this report.

Since then, the Collective has benefited in 1997 from Special Status with ECOSOC, and it has continued to produce reports on the condition of women in the Maghreb. We have initiated polls and qualitative surveys in the three Maghreb countries on the degree of membership and the perception of equality between women and men in Maghreb societies. All of CME's work reflect its aspiration to build a solid case on the basis research, polls, surveys, inventory of laws, conventions and international instruments for its advocacy and strategy for equality between women and men in the Maghreb, on the basis of a universal human rights position, while contextualizing and deconstructing Islamic legal doctrine.

A close examination of the language used within this report corroborates Keck & Sikkink's findings on framing women's rights issues within the context of a universal

human rights framework for broader visibility of the issue and the establishing of norms. The CME report frequently cites the UDHR, CEDAW and various other international laws as justification for gender equality and the furthering of women's rights. The work of the CME is just one example of how Tunisian women are actively engaging with regional feminist networks to frame their issues. These regional partnerships and networking between women in the Maghreb has been ongoing since the 2000's. Women's mobilizations in the region historically have revolved around support for nationalist movements, advocating for women's access to education and the criminalization of violence against women (Moghadam, 2017, pp. 334 - 335). Scholars have identified similarities in terms of how the development of women's rights emerged in some of these countries and the challenges women in the Maghreb faced (Moghadam, 2017, p. 335). A body of scholarship has identified state feminism as a characteristic of the modernizing regimes in the region after independence (Moghadam, 2017, pp. 335 - 336). This is important to note as this shared experience with state feminism drew women in the region together to network and understand how their issues and goals align with each other. This engagement often resulted in joint advocacy for social and labor rights, as well as the enhancement of women's civil and political rights (Moghadam, 2017, p. 334). Despite these earlier connections between the Tunisian women's movement and other regional feminist organizations, it is the Arab Spring period that consolidated these regional feminist networks by providing more opportunities and platforms for women in the Maghreb to engage collectively in research, lobbying, advocacy and movement-building (Moghadam, 2017, p.340). Further to that, most if not all women's organizations in the Maghreb are actively engaged with UN Women's global women's rights agenda, the Beijing Declaration Platform for Action and CEDAW (Moghadam, 2017, pp. 333 - 334). The importance of regional networks in collectively identifying issues has been a way to strategically frame and legitimize issues that women in the Maghreb region are concerned about. An IGO like the UN Women will very likely invest in addressing issues that are voiced by a variety of regional actors as this demonstrates a pattern and legitimizes the issues brought forward. Tunisian women are acutely aware of this strength and potential regional advocacy networks have in shaping the agenda and outcomes for women's rights in the country and in the region. Essentially, the use of universalist themes and language while engaging in regional and transnational advocacy legitimizes the issue and draws to it a broad range of support and resources. An interview with Amira Yahyaoui, Tunisian entrepreneur and human

rights advocate exemplifies this when she elaborates on gender equality in Tunisia and connects the discourse on gender equality to a universal understanding of equality.

For me we are fighting a double battle. For Tunisian women, we need to fight for the universal nature of legal equality – our objective, our example should be universality. And for the Arab world it is to change their mentality. There is no specificity in rights; no specificity of identity and no religious specificity. There might be particulars in life perhaps – in everyday life, in festivals, in traditions. But when it comes to rights, the law must defend everyone equally (Yahyaoui, 2013).

### **3.5. Tunisian Women Networking: Establishing Norms and Collective Action**

One broad strand of research within Constructivism has focused on the intentional efforts of individuals and groups to change social understandings and to create intersubjective meanings. We see this often in activism, whereby a group of individuals who dislike existing norms and rules in politics collectively strategize and engage in actions to counter these norms through the dissemination of new ones. This is essentially Finnemore and Keck's central thesis in *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*, where the authors seek to understand how these norms operate and the conditions that might contribute to their successful dissemination (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This area of research is perplexing because activists working to change norms often have few levers of conventional power relative to those controlling existing structures (often the state or corporations). Nevertheless, as Keck and Sikkink have previously found, TANs have in fact accomplished relative success within this area and though this phenomena is not easily explained by dominant traditional theoretical approaches, they make room for constructivist alternatives (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). An analysis of the data shows a strong relationship between Tunisia's women's movement and international engagement. Tunisian women civil society organizers often refer to their regional and international networks and frequently collaborate with various transnational organizations and IGOs in their work on women's rights. For example, Tunisian activist and entrepreneur Ahlem Nasraoui is a member of the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL). The alliance brings together existing women rights and peace practitioners, organizations, and networks actively engaged in promoting peace and women's rights, to enable strategic collaboration and collective action.

I am so grateful for WASL as it equipped me with knowledge and expertise on how to access such events and networks for the betterment of our communities and the establishment of vibrant initiatives that are rooted in the local and yet reaches the international to spread the values and principles of resilience, empowerment and enablement of local communities as drivers of peace and sustainable development (Nasraoui, 2018).

The Tunis Forum on Gender Equality is another example of a wide scale formal networking event that provided a platform for Tunisian women to connect with women around the world on key women' rights issues (Tunisian Forum on Gender Equality, 2019). The sessions provided a space that encouraged the exchange of ideas, dialogue and facilitated serious academic based discussions. Cumulatively, the Forum acted as a space to reinforce norms and engage in the creation of meanings pertaining to the development of women's rights globally (Tunisian Forum on Gender Equality, 2019). To this aim, the Forum also launched an online consultation session to engage the diverse actors from various regions of the world in a global dialogue to identify key issues that formed the basis of the Forum's agenda (Tunisian Forum on Gender Equality, 2019). The consultation provided the Government of Tunisia, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Women with ideas, recommendations and actions with the objective of influencing the dialogue and the agenda at Beijing +25. These networking events that involve multi level actors from the national, regional and international arena are ideal places to establish new norms and engage with diverse influential leaders on the various issues within the women's rights arena (Tunisian Forum on Gender Equality, 2019). Tunisian women activists and organizers are acutely aware of the potential these spaces and platforms hold in influencing important stakeholders on their agenda and issues. Perhaps this is why we see Tunisian women from across the spectrum welcome transnational connections and actively participate in forums, regional councils, international organizations, and co-partner with various transnational organizations to develop programs and projects focused on the development of women in Tunisia. We see that working through formalized transnational networks has changed the ways and the conditions under which Tunisian women civil society actors engage in norm entrepreneurship on women's rights. It is shifting the attributes of these actors, helping Tunisian women develop visibility, capacity and connectedness through the realization of a global community focused on human rights and its sub-categories, in this case women's rights. Furthermore, this shift towards transnational engagement has transformed power relations between Tunisian women and other actors – in particular,

the state and IGOs. This engagement has enabled Tunisian women to move beyond domestic contexts to engage with state and non-state actors through regional and international public platforms. It has also introduced shifts in the dynamics of norm entrepreneurship for Tunisian women through the existence of the network itself, which exercises agency through collaborative actions and intra-network relations.

### **3.6. Transnational Advocacy Networks and Women's Organizing in Tunisia**

Entering into the Arab Spring period, Tunisia is still considered to be in a transitional phase that has been developing with relative success. Through the success of its revolution, Tunisia's civil society actors have gained a greater sense of citizenship and freedom. This is reflective in terms of how women activists and civil society organizers strategize and form network linkages regionally and transnationally (Labidi, 2007). One of the main incentives encouraging Tunisia's women to network regionally and transnationally has been to mitigate against state cooptation (Labidi, 2007). Through these transnational links Tunisian women find a space within a broader global collective towards the facilitation of deeper accountability, access to a broader range of resources, and connecting to a wide network of shared norms and goals (Labidi, 2007). Closer observations of these interactions highlight a particular trend in terms of the nature of the norms that are disseminated. These norms tend to emphasize democratization, universal human rights and global solidarity, together acting as a means of identification while creating a broader sense of community for women in Tunisia (Labidi, 2007). Based on the evidence available, we can assess that Tunisian women are in the process of constructing broader access to a global feminism. Earlier women's rights organizers had formulated a position based on the universality of law, publishing newsletters, taking part in marches, and commemorative celebrations all common practices since the independence period in Tunisia (Labidi, 2007). The new generation of women Arab Spring onwards continues to use these strategies, but they now concentrate their efforts on unveiling domains of subjectivity in culture, striving for universality through building coalitions, networks and platforms not only within a local context, but now within a regional and transnational context as well. Perhaps through these transnational and regional alliances Tunisian women are not just championing women's rights in Tunisia, but forging their way through as global ambassadors within the women's rights arena.

## **Chapter 4. Methodology & Analysis**

### **4.1. Overview of Methodology**

This thesis utilizes documentary methods of research and will present a brief case study in this section to analyze the data collected. I will base my research on a corpus of texts and transcribed public audio recordings — mainly a few select pages from FAIZA in 1959, a 1970 documentary featuring Habib Bourguiba, a speech by the Tunisian Minister of Family and Children in 2000, the Final Report: Recommendations from the 2019 Forum on Gender Equality, secondary analysis of transcribed audio recordings of documentaries, speeches and interviews with women politicians, activists, academics and civil society organizers, blogposts, magazine editorials, Tunisia's 2009 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> CEDAW combined committee report, CEDAW, Article 46 of Tunisia's Constitution of 2014, Article 21 of Tunisia's Constitution of 2014, Tunisia's Organic Law No. 2017-58 on Eliminating Violence Against Women, Article 227 of Tunisia's penal code, online Tunisian publications written by women civil society activist and the Alternative CEDAW Report written by the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (ATFD). The audio and video data used for this research has been transcribed into text format using AWS Transcribe. In total, twenty text documents were coded and uploaded into the software Dedoose for analysis. The remaining data, mainly CEDAW, Article 46 of Tunisia's Constitution of 2014, Article 21 of Tunisia's Constitution of 2014, Tunisia's Law on Eliminating Violence Against Women, Article 227 of Tunisia's penal code will be discussed separately in the results segment of this chapter. Following an in depth presentation of the data, I will employ a discourse analysis method to analyze the data; coding the data using the software Dedoose to identify key themes that exemplify and define transnational feminist and advocacy norms. I will then use these results to provide a contextual discussion of the results and its relation to my research question.

### **4.2. Overview of the Data**

The section below outlines the details of the various types of data used for this research. The data encompasses a range of examples of women's organizing post independence and during the Arab Spring period in Tunisia. A comparison of the data based on the different time periods in Tunisia reveals a significant pattern emerging indicating how

women's organizing in Tunisia has changed since the post independence period to the Arab Spring period. Although the data prior to the Arab Spring period is limited, we observe that the state's role in shaping and directing the agenda of women's rights in the country is significant, posing various challenges for Tunisian women's rights organizers as the state ultimately was the primary source of consultation and authority on matters relating to the development of women. Perhaps this has been a contributing factor as to why it is difficult to obtain data prior to the Arab Spring period of local women's organizations in Tunisia connecting and networking with other transnational agencies and organizations. However, this changes during the Arab Spring period and onwards, as we see the country as whole open up various channels of communication to network and liaise on regional and international levels. This vital change in exposure and access to information sharing ignited by the Arab Spring has also shaped and directed the ways women in Tunisia have opted to organize and prioritize their actions. It is also necessary to note that the data collated is not exhaustive and is based on data that was accessible in English. There is in fact a plethora of data available in French and in Arabic especially during the Arab Spring period. In short, the prioritization of obtaining data in English could potentially skew the findings and act as a bias when conducting the analysis.

### **Post-independence period: 1956 – 2009**

In 1959, pioneer visual artist Safia Farhat founded Tunisia's first women's magazine. The magazine was called Faiza and ran from 1959 to 1968 (Debuysere, 2016, p. 210). The content of the magazine was primarily focused on issues relating to the way Tunisian women presented themselves in public, information about women's rights as enshrined in the CPS, and encouraged women to assume a more western lifestyle by introducing topics that covered issues relating to etiquette, fashion and romance (Faiza, 1959; 1961). Farhat's husband Abdallah Farhat was the private secretary of Habib Bourguiba and later assumed various ministerial posts in Bourguiba's government (Filali, 2015, p. 285). This in turn led to Faiza receiving full endorsement and support from the Bourguiba administration at the time. For example, the first two pages of Faiza's first publication in 1959 had been dedicated to Bourguiba. This elaborate dedication included his biography and the contribution of his administration to the advancement and development of women's rights in the country. Although the emergence of Faiza into the public sphere is historically symbolic for the development of women in Tunisia, it is important to be cautious about the emphasis we give such developments especially

considering the limits state feminism at the time had imposed on Tunisian women artists, writers and content creators.



For example, a documentary film released in 1970 on women's rights in Tunisia narrated by Habib Bourguiba himself is further evidence of how involved he and the state were in controlling the agenda relating to women's rights in the country, often times acting as the primary spokesperson for Tunisian women. In the documentary, Bourguiba essentially mansplains the history of women's rights in the country and presents himself to the audience as the reason for the advancement of women's rights in Tunisia.

To remove the veil, this freeing act for women, I have been the first and the only Arab and Muslim Head of State who dared to establish and encourage this. I am also the first and the only Head of State who forbade polygamy, gave both spouses an equal right to pursue a divorce right and I did so in a conservative society.

This documentary acts as a reminder of how involved the state at the time was in shaping and developing the image of Tunisian women in the country, the political leanings they should identify with, and the paradigm of values they should adhere to. As

Mounira Charrad notes, this period in Tunisia mostly saw the women's rights movement dormant and when there was movement it was always state led (Charrad, 2001).

In relation to that, even closer to the Arab Spring period we continue to see the Tunisian government engage in state feminism, exerting its authority and influence on the women's rights agenda in the country. A transcript of a press conference on June 9, 2000 by Tunisia's Minister for Women and Children Neziha Zarrouk provides some insight into the framework for women's rights in the country at the time under the leadership of Ben Ali. Zarrouk expounds on the history of women's development and rights in the country and how Tunisia has emerged as a leader in the region on issues relating to women's legal rights and freedoms. Nevertheless, a section of her speech is dedicated to the role and significance of Ben Ali's leadership in protecting and making necessary changes to the course of women's rights in the country.

The rise of Islam in the 1980s failed to halt women's progress, thanks to the strong political will of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who considered women's rights as an integral part of women's rights. He ordered a multi-discipline committee to look at the weaknesses within the Personal Status Code and make amendments. That led to a number of changes, which led to the scraping of an article that called for a woman to obey her husband and to Tunisian women being able to pass on their nationality to their children.

Arab Spring period: 2010 - 2020

The Tunisian Gender Equality Forum was held in Tunis in 2019 hosted jointly by the Tunisian government and UN Women (Tunisian Forum on Gender Equality, 2019). The Forum gathered 500 participants from around the world that included representatives from national governments, civil society, academia, international organizations and the private sector. Consultative processes that engaged 6,000 people from different parts of the world shaped the Forum's agenda and its final recommendations (Tunisian Forum on Gender Equality, 2019). The Forum was one of the first global gatherings to assess the progress made in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, specifically discussing women's leadership in local governance, peace and security issues, and the linkages between innovation, technology and gender equality (Tunisian Forum on Gender Equality, 2019). For Tunisian women, the Forum acted as a vehicle to mobilize a diverse spectrum of women in Tunisia fighting for women's rights to expand their networking and advocacy, connecting these struggles to a broader global

audience. The forum included panel speakers from Tunisian secular and Islamist women alike such as Souad Abderrahim the mayor of Tunis and member of the Ennahda party, prominent Tunisian academic and feminist Khadija Arfaoui, Neziha Labidi Minister of the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Elderly, and Sarah ben Said from the women's civil society organization Aswat Nissa (Tunisian Forum on Gender Equality, 2019). This Forum is a strong example of the types of networking Tunisian women organizers and activists who come from a diverse spectrum of affiliations lead and participate in. The Forum provided a space for collaborative dialogue and engagement approaches, and through this we see how interaction facilitates the creation of meanings, norms and connections to a broader global civil society, specifically transnational feminism.

The Forum was an opportunity to mobilize gender equality champions from different sectors and ages aiming at reinforcing their voice, networking and advocacy to make international commitments a lived reality for women and men, everywhere.

In closing, the Forum released a final report titled Recommendations from the 2019 Forum on Gender Equality (Tunisian Forum on Gender Equality, 2019). The report outlines the diversity of women and mobilization of feminist groups for global coordination and action for promoting women's rights. To reclaim these spaces for women the report recommends that the Beijing +25 processes needs to be inclusive, intersectional and include new developments in technology that were not present 25 years ago (Tunisian Forum on Gender Equality, 2019). The report also emphasizes the significance of the civil society sector and to support their access to government reports on the implementation of the key developments pertaining to gender equality. The report also stresses the importance of integrating work on women, peace and security in the context of CEDAW and the links between disarmament, demilitarization and the implementation of a feminist peace. The report concludes with an emphasis on the importance of collaborative action to benefit from technological change and to link the activities of grassroots organizations with national, regional and international level institutions, policy and reporting mechanisms.

Work with policy makers to lift all reservations on international treaties, conventions and resolutions and build the capacities of gender advocates to work for the full implementation of all treaties. Beijing+25 should establish global and regional coalitions or global campaigns of action on specific themes to confront the backlash and advance women's rights.

A secondary analysis of available public interviews and documentaries of Tunisian women provide further evidence of these transnational linkages and how these linkages shape the ways Tunisian women express their views on the development of women's rights in the country. I collected thirteen publicly accessible interviews and speeches from online sites and within documentaries, (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Youtube and Vimeo) specifically on issues related to women's rights, women's development in the economic, health and education sectors, and women's political participation. The interviews include Tunisian women political actors (secular and Islamist), civil society actors, academics, rural women and urban women. In this section I will review a portion of these interviews. Two of those interviews were conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace with Tunisian politician Maherzia Labidi and Tunisian Mayor Souad Abderrahim, both members of the Ennahda party, exemplify the shifts taking place amongst Tunisian Islamist women in terms of how they perceive their role as women in politics while navigating the arena of women's rights. These women in their own right are highly established, respected and engaged in the struggle for the liberation and recognition of Tunisian women's rights. A documentary highlighting the work of Sarah Toumi, co-founder of a women's civil society organization focussed on providing access to education, health and safety to rural Tunisian women. The documentary explores her partnership with two organizations, the Orange Foundation an international organization focussed on providing rural communities access to digital technology and the African Women's Forum (AWF), a regional women's organization that supports the initiatives of African women to build cross border networks between various women's organizations in North Africa and Sub Saharan Africa. The fourth interview is an interview with Ikram Ben Said, founder and President of Aswat Nisa (Women's Voices). This interview is part of a collaborative initiative from four leading organizations in the field of women's political participation – International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), UNDP, and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). Together these organizations launched The International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (iKNOW Politics) a platform that highlights issues in the area of women's political participation, as well as a platform that fosters exchange, dialogue and knowledge creation for all who are engaged in promoting women's political participation. iKNOW Politics conducted several interviews with various Tunisian women from different

professional backgrounds and organizations to speak to the issue of women's political participation.

Souad Abderrahim is the current Mayor of Tunis, Tunisia's capital since 2018. She is the first Arab woman serving as mayor of an Arab capital, effectively making history for women in Tunisia. In 2011 she was elected to the Constituent Assembly for Ennahdha representing the capital. Abderrahim has actively engaged with regional and international networks speaking at various international public forums on women's participation in politics and women's rights. For example, when asked about her election into office and the impact that has had on the development of women rights in the country, she explains that Tunisia is making progress within the women's rights arena, but still has a long way to go.

Perhaps having a female mayor has become a form of motivation for many women in Tunis. Overall, there is pride and joy among Tunis residents, who hope that the municipality will finally change under my leadership. I am very happy when I see outpouring of support from allies around the world. – (Abderrahim, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018)

Similarly, Maherzia Labidi a seasoned Tunisian politician, academic, women's rights advocate and public speaker has also established various transnational advocacy links through her organizing with the NGOs such the Global Women of Faith Network, Religions for Peace based in New York (where she served as the President in 2015), and her public engagements with various international organizations and institutes. In her interviews, Labidi stresses on the importance of strengthening Tunisia's new democracy and working towards increased representation of women and youth in politics. In another interview with Religions for Peace, Labidi emphasizes the need for a global women's dialogue in order to understand women's shared issues and to bridge the gaps within their own states, facilitating mediations on important issues impacting women globally. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace describes itself as a critical thinking platform bringing together various thinkers from diverse disciplines and perspectives from more than twenty countries working collectively as one network to advance international peace. Contrary to the perspective given by various feminist and scholars on the approach of Islamist women in Tunisia, we observe a shift in political parties such as Ennahda in terms of the women political representatives the party endorses and supports. For example, accepting these opportunities to speak at regional and international levels, and to actively participate in transnational women's organizing

through various avenues, regardless of intention has been fostering seeds of unity amongst Tunisian women across a broad and diverse spectrum in the country. This is perhaps an outcome of the growing interconnectedness of networks Tunisian women are exposed to and the increasing opportunities to collaborate at various levels locally, regionally and internationally.

Indeed, with the political transition of the country, Ennahda is undergoing its own transition. During our tenth congress, and after two years of discussion with our activists and members, we made an important decision to focus on governing. To face despotism, to fight for liberty, pluralism, and democracy, we needed to be a comprehensive movement dealing with religious, educational, cultural, and political tasks and topics. Now, through this social contract, we have settled with Tunisians the issue of how and why to govern, and the [nature of] institutions and pluralism. So we had to evolve into a political party specializing in political programs, and let civil society appropriate the cultural and social side of our project. Since we are continuously in connection with our society, I think that our projects for the local elections will focus on programs to address their needs, including housing, health, education, and infrastructure. We will focus on convincing Tunisians that we offer them the best program. We will focus on convincing youth and women to be in our lists, because the main issue of these elections is how to share power between the centralized state and regions, and also between old (over 50) politicians and women and youth. And a successful party will be one engaging more young people and more women on its lists. We have to work on this, and I think that we are ready. - (Labidi, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018)

A mini documentary conducted by the Orange Foundation in collaboration with the African Women's Forum highlights the work of Sarah Toumi, a Tunisian woman who founded Ajmi Toumi a women's organization for rural women in her ancestral village Bir Salah, Tunisia. The Orange Foundation is a global nongovernmental organization that focuses on projects that enables access to technology, knowledge sharing and networking via digital technology for vulnerable, poor and rural communities. The organization's mission is to contribute to the economic and social progress of developing countries and to enable equal opportunities. Similarly, The African Women's Forum (AWF) is a pan-African association based in Rabat, Morocco with branches in several countries such as Tunisia, Gambia, and Ghana. Its main purpose is to strengthen the participation of women and influence the strategic decisions of states and societies while strengthening the situation of women through networking on issues using a broader regional women's rights framework. The AWF also aims to reinforce a better knowledge of countries through culture, especially between the countries of the Maghreb and the

other countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. In the documentary Toumi introduces her organization's programs and explains how the organization has collaborated with the Orange Foundation and the AWF to build a school, a women's club and a youth club in Bir Salah. Toumi explains that access to education for rural women continues to be a challenging issue and that education is often the means for women to become empowered. Toumi connects the issues facing women in Bir Salah to the broader global climate on women's rights and believes it is necessary for rural women to have access to participate in the processes that shape decisions nationally and internationally. These examples of transnational collaborations further substantiate the scope and reach of TANs in engaging with a diverse range of Tunisian women. More importantly, these examples show us the ways these interactions are shaping norms and connecting women to a broader sense of a global women's solidarity that seeks to use the language of a universal human rights framework to impact policies and legislation at national, regional and international levels.

Today we count on women. If we had integrated women fifty years ago in the global development policies, we would have much less poverty and issues in the world. My father passed away last year at the age of 54. He always said, "You will see, these girls are going to change the history of this village (Toumi, 2013).

In 2014, Ikram Ben Said, founder and President of Aswat Nisa (Voices of Women) attended the Madeleine Albright Luncheon in the United States to receive an award for a project Aswat Nisa launched focussed on building a national and international network of women to participate in training and resources that will enable greater political participation for Tunisian women in the country. The project itself was co-organized in collaboration with UN Women, Oxfam and the National Democratic Institute. During this luncheon, iKNOW Politics was able to secure an interview with Ben Said regarding this project and on the issue of women's political participation in relation to the upcoming elections at the time.

The project for which we received the Madeline Albright Award is called the Political Academy for Women. The Political Academy for Women aims to support women aspiring to run for parliamentary elections – and we are about to hold elections in Tunisia – to strengthen their skills and give them the opportunity to build networks with other women politicians in Tunisia and from around the world who have succeeded in reaching decision making positions, to share with these women their experiences and advise. The Political Academy is not just a project but a big dream, we hope one

day to establish a center for women – regardless of ideological and political differences, to be a safe for women politicians to learn and share experiences. We not only want to assist these women in accessing decision making positions, but also to enable them through shifts in the public policy arena (Said, 2014).

Another source of evidence for transnational networking within the women’s rights arena has been Tunisia’s CEDAW Committee reports that are based on consultative processes with the Tunisian women’s associations, CSOs, the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Elderly and Tunisia’s public institutions. Women leaders from different professional backgrounds and regions in the world represent the Committee, which acts as a mechanism to monitor, identify gaps and generate recommendations for each specific state that has signed on to and ratified CEDAW. In Tunisia, the last report was a two-year combined report released in 2009 as the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> CEDAW Report. The report outlines the progress made in response to the questions raised by the Committee during its examination of the third and fourth reports of Tunisia at its 567<sup>th</sup> and 568<sup>th</sup> sessions on 14 June 2002. The report also provides information that allows the Committee to analyse and understand Tunisia’s approach in applying the CEDAW. The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> CEDAW report covers a range of issues impacting women’s rights in Tunisia such as violence against women, challenges in building regional networks, rural women’s access to education, and various other issues related to the development and well being of Tunisian women.

The Committee recommends that the State party seize all possible opportunities, including through regional cooperation programmes, to provide Tunisian girls and women with the opportunity to gain experience abroad on an equal footing with men.

The Committee emphasizes that full and effective implementation of the Convention is indispensable for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. It calls for the integration of a gender perspective and the explicit reflection of the provisions of the Convention in all efforts aimed at the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and requests the State party to include information thereon in its next periodic report.

In October 2010, the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) in conjunction with the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH) and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) submitted an alternative report to the official Tunisian report on compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of

Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This collaboration between the ATFD and the FIDH is evidence of this shift in terms of how women's organizations in the country are expanding their networks internationally and the ways in which they are organizing their support. This alternative report will be presented in this chapter as a case study.

### **4.3. Assessing the Availability of Data from 1956 to 2009 versus 2010 to 2020**

An in-depth analysis of the minimal data that is available prior to the Arab Spring indicates that women in Tunisia did in fact experience significant barriers and oppression due to an authoritarian and controlling state government. More importantly, it reveals the extent and the severity of the impact state feminism had on constructing and directing the women's rights agenda in the country. For example, an analysis of the documentary film in 1970 narrated by Habib Bourguiba indicates that Bourguiba was determined on framing his contribution to the development of women's rights in Tunisia as revolutionary and heroic. We see evidence of this when Faiza the first women's magazine launched in 1958 that was focused on issues relating to the development of women in the country sponsored by the Tunisian state frequently promoted positive commentary of the state and glorified Bourguiba's role in developing women's rights. Undoubtedly, the impact of this model of state feminism certainly limited women's capacities and agency to network locally, regionally and internationally before the Arab Spring events. However, as we draw closer to the Arab Spring period we begin to see emerge a plethora of documents, news articles and events focused on women's rights that foreshadow the Arab Spring revolution. Overall, the comparison in terms of the availability of data alone between the two periods from 1956 to 2009 versus 2010 to 2020 is also substantial evidence that the Arab Spring was a catalyst for the shift within the women's rights movement in Tunisia towards a universal and transnational approach to activism, organizing and mobilizing.

#### 4.4. Thematic Analysis of the Data: 2010 to 2020



**Figure 4.1. Cloud Analysis of Key Themes**

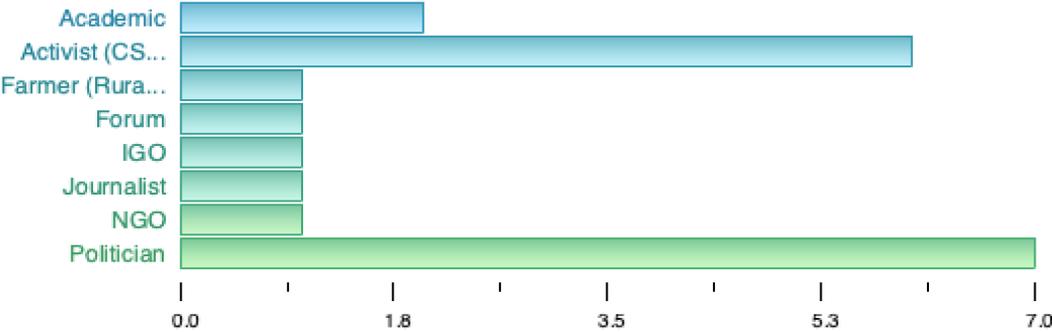
The analysis of the data from 2010 onwards to 2020 reveals a strong relationship between Tunisian women’s rights organizers and transnational advocacy networking. More importantly my analysis focused on the Arab Spring period strongly indicates that women in Tunisia are in fact experiencing a transformative shift in terms of how women’s rights is conceptualized and how Tunisian women participate in building a framework for transnational engagement and collective action within the women’s rights arena. We observe shared similarities across the spectrum of Tunisian women activists, politicians and even rural women in terms of how they address and discuss issues related to women. A thematic analysis of the twenty documents assessed reveal that many women in Tunisia share key perspectives and frame these issues using a relatively shared model for the advancement of women’s rights in the country. It is necessary to note that these themes selected are not exhaustive and is based on data that was accessible in English.

**Key Themes for Analysis**

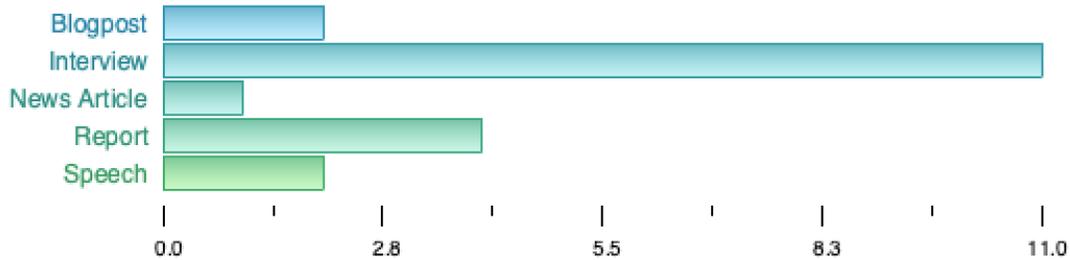
Activism, Advocacy, Bridging Gaps, CEDAW, Collective Action, Democratization, Empowerment of Women, Feminism, Global Linkages, Gender Equality, Gender Based Violence (GBV), Information Technology, International Engagement, Mobilization, Networks/ Networking, Policy Development, Strategic Organizing, Transnational Advocacy, Transnational Solidarity, Tunisian Women United, Universality of Human Rights, United Nations, Women’s Rights, Women’s Political Participation

**Table 4.1. Key Themes for Analysis**

I identified twenty-three core themes (refer to table 4.1) related to women’s rights and their engagement with TANs in Tunisia. These key themes are diverse and broad in their scope and relate back to the constructivist theoretical framework of this research. It is necessary to note that these themes selected are not exhaustive and is based on data that was accessible in English. There is in fact a plethora of data available in French and in Arabic especially during the Arab Spring period. In short, the prioritization of obtaining data in English could potentially skew the findings and act as a bias when conducting the analysis.



**Figure 4.2. Data Ratios: Category**



**Figure 4.3. Data Ratios: Type**

As illustrated in Figures 4.2 and 4.3 respectively, the data collated consist of public interviews, speeches, reports, blogposts and news articles that include women politicians, activists, academics, journalists and rural women. A total of two hundred and forty four passages were highlighted and identified during the coding of the data. This coding was conducted based on a careful and contextual reading of each document that was then selected and matched to the identified key themes to produce an analysis of the frequency and the patterns where these themes emerged across the data. As observed in figure 4.1, the focus of most Tunisian women within the women’s rights arena has been to advance women’s political participation in the country and to achieve deeper gender equality. These goals are often accompanied within a framework that conceptualizes women’s rights as part of a broader understanding of universal human rights. Correspondingly, this framework acts as a bridge that connects women in Tunisia to broader global discourses on women’s rights, providing opportunities for international engagement and transnational networking focused on advocacy, visibility, education and collective action. During my research I found that a significant portion of projects Tunisian women CSOs were involved in were typically funded and developed in collaboration with transnational networks and partners. These networks were divided between regional organizations and broader international organizations.

#### **4.5. Connecting TANs to Women’s Rights in the Arab Spring Period**

The most significant aspect of the analysis reveals that the engagement between Tunisian women’s rights organizations and TANs Arab Spring onwards have in fact shaped the development of women’s rights in Tunisia. Furthermore, the data indicates

that both Islamist and secular identified women are increasingly inclined to frame the women's rights issues in the country as a Tunisian women's issue as opposed to a "secular" or "Islamist" women's issue. Although ideological differences between Islamist and secular women play a role in the ways these women organize, many Tunisian women are calling for unity, mutual respect, and collaboration. In a blogpost written by Tunisian scholar and feminist Mounira Charrad, she notes this shift that is taking place between Tunisian women from different ideological positions towards a more inclusive and united framework (Charrad, 2018). Below is excerpt from her blogpost describing how Islamist and secular leaning women are attempting to create a more inclusive and collaborative atmosphere amongst themselves.

Although these associations are characterized as "secular leaning" or "Islamist leaning," they all voice a commitment to serving Tunisian women. In actuality, "Islamist" and "secularist" in the context of Tunisia today should not be understood as a dichotomy but rather as a spectrum of ideological positions held by women's associations and political parties... Many women's associations also attempt to build bridges across ideological and religious lines. For example, in June 2017, the Islamist think tank Afkar Nissa sponsored a dialogue on women's rights that included Bouchra Belhaj Hamida, a secular MP and former ATFD president; Mehrezia Labidi, an Islamist Party MP; and a religious scholar (Charrad, 2018).

Similarly, Ikram Ben Said in her interview with IKNOW Politics on the launch of Aswat Nissa's new program uses inclusive language when discussing women's political participation in Tunisia. She acknowledges that women do in fact come from diverse ideological positions, nevertheless, she would like for this program to be accessible to all Tunisian women regardless of ideological differences (Said, 2014).

The Political Academy for Women aims to support women aspiring to run for parliamentary elections – and we are about to hold elections in Tunisia – to strengthen their skills and give them the opportunity to build networks with other women politicians in Tunisia and from around the world who have succeeded in reaching decision making positions, to share with these women their experiences and advise. The Political Academy is not just a project but a big dream, we hope one day to establish a center for women – regardless of ideological and political differences, to be a safe for women politicians to learn and share experiences (Said, 2014).

Since 2011, Tunisian women have created between two hundred to three hundred new women's associations. These associations are diverse and vary in size and organizational style, and they include a spectrum of women's voices that seek to

advance women's political, social, legal and economic interests (Hursh 2017, pp. 332 - 333). While participating in coalitions on a number of issues, new women's associations have also carved a space for themselves in supporting particular groups of women and engaging marginalized women and youth. Correspondingly, the legal landscape in Tunisia pertaining to women's rights has also seen significant developments (Hursh, 2017, pp. 319 -320). For example, since the 2011 revolution women played an instrumental role in organizing demonstrations to ensure that gender equality and women's rights remained high on the political agenda during this transitional period (Hursh, 2017, pp. 319 - 320). The progress of the women's rights movement has been reflected in the adoption of Tunisia's new Constitution in 2014, which guarantees greater protection against violence, equality between men and women, and requires the state to work towards gender parity in elected assemblies (Tunisian Const, art.6 2014). Though contested, the new Constitution did not include reference to Shari'a law but instead an entire article dedicated to protecting and strengthening women's rights (Tunisian Const, art.21 & art. 46, 2014).

Another major step forward for women's rights in Tunisia was the adoption of Organic Law No. 2017-58 on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in August of 2017. The law amends provisions of the CSP and the Penal Code, and it requires the state to expand support services for women victims of violence and to develop an approach to prevention (Organic Law 58, 2017). The law broadens the definition of violence against women to include "any moral, sexual or economic assault against women, based on discrimination against the sex and which results in prejudice, suffering, or physical, psychological, sexual or economic damage" (Organic Law 58, 2017). Notably, this definition considers discrimination itself as a form of violence. The law makes it easier to prosecute domestic abuse and imposes penalties for sexual harassment in public. It abolishes Article 227 of the Penal Code, which offered immunity to perpetrators of sexual acts with minors who married their victims (Organic Law 58, 2017). The law also includes preventive measures such as directing government agencies to train their staff to detect and prevent violence against women, and creating a National Observatory for the Prevention of Violence Against Women responsible for monitoring the effectiveness and efficiency of the law's application (Organic Law 58, 2017). Women's organizations in Tunisia have been campaigning and advocating for better laws related to GBV and violence against women (VAW) since before the revolution. However, posts 2011 we

see many of these campaigns reach international attention and many Tunisian women have opted to co-partner with regional and international organizations to fund and develop these campaigns. For example in 2020 Tunisian youth from Douar Hicher and International Alert collaborated on an anti-violence video campaign titled *Four Days of Violence: Amira's Story*. This video highlights issues around GBV and sexual violence that Tunisian women continue to face even despite comprehensive legal protections (International Alert, 2020). The organization International Alert is an international peacebuilding organization focused on facilitating peace processes and reducing violence to achieve change in fragile and conflict-affected countries and territories.

Young people in Tunisia are calling on their communities to stand up against violence in a series of short films shedding light on the violence faced by marginalised communities in Tunisia – still rife almost 10 years after the revolution. Young Tunisians living in deprived areas of Tunisia confront violence, stigma and harassment on a daily basis. These include human rights violations, institutional violence, gender-based violence, or violence in the home or the workplace... For the International day of Non-Violence, International Alert Tunisia are launching the Four Days of Violence campaign, created with young people in Douar Hicher to raise awareness of the issues and advocate for their communities and policy makers to stand up for the laws that should protect them. The stories interweave to show the culture of violence they face (International Alert, 2020).

#### **4.6. Case Study: 2010 ATFD Alternative CEDAW Report**

The ATFD was founded in 1989 by a group of women initially involved in the formation of the Tahar-Haddad club in the 1970's (El-Masri, 2015). As one of the oldest feminist organizations in the country, the ATFD has spent the last three decades deeply invested in shaping the development of women's rights in Tunisia. Over the years, the ATFD has evolved to also explicitly identify itself as a secular feminist association focused on issues related to women's legal rights and freedoms in the country, while promoting gender equality (Arfaoui, 2015, pp. 57 -58). Prior to the Arab Spring period, the ATFD like many of its counterpart organizations dealt with severe restrictions that were imposed by President Ben Ali's administration. On one hand, these limitations immobilized the activist nature of the organization's approach, and on the other hand, it allowed for the executive members of the ATFD to instead engage on a more political and legislative front on issues pertaining to women's rights (Arfaoui, 2015, pp. 57 -58).

This presented a unique opportunity for the ATFD to consolidate itself as a respected and established organization in Tunisia representing the voices of middle to upper class educated Tunisian women that were becoming increasingly frustrated with the restrictions of state led feminism. During the Arab Spring period, the ATFD has initiated and successfully advocated for a broad range of legislative reforms that have positively impacted the lives of Tunisian women in the country (El-Masri, 2015, p. 137).

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, is often described as an international bill of rights for women. Consisting of a preamble and 30 articles, it defines what constitutes discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. The Convention defines discrimination against women as "...any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field." By accepting the Convention, States commit themselves to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all forms. Prior to 2014, the Tunisian government maintained reservations concerning treaty requirements to provide equality to women in family matters. This included passing on their nationality to their children, rights and responsibilities in marriage and divorce, matters relating to children and guardianship, personal rights for husbands and wives with regard to family name and occupation, and ownership of property (UN Status of Treaties, 1981).

Upon the publication of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> CEDAW report in 2009, the ATDF released an alternative report in collaboration with the FIDH and the LTDH for submission to the CEDAW Committee in 2010 (ATFD Alternative Report, 2010). The ATDF justified the release of this report citing inadequacies and gaps in the 5<sup>TH</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> CEDAW Committee report. This alternative report specifically addresses the reservations made by the Tunisian government and makes a firm call for these reservations to be lifted. The report encourages the need for political will and action on the part of decision-makers, outlining the impacts of these reservations to CEDAW on women's rights in Tunisia.

**Reservation concerning article 9, paragraph 2:**

The Tunisian Government expresses its reservation with regard to the provisions in article 9, paragraph 2 of the Convention, which must not conflict with the provisions of chapter VI of the Tunisian Nationality Code.

**Reservation concerning article 16, paragraphs (c), (d), (f), (g) and (h):**

The Tunisian Government considers itself not bound by article 16, paragraphs (c), (d) and (f) of the Convention and declares that paragraphs (g) and (h) of that article must not conflict with the provisions of the Personal Status Code concerning the granting of family names to children and the acquisition of property through inheritance.

**Declaration concerning article 15, paragraph 4:**

In accordance with the provisions of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, dated 23 May 1969, the Tunisian Government emphasizes that the requirements of article 15, paragraph 4, of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, and particularly that part relating to the right of women to choose their residence and domicile, must not be interpreted in a manner which conflicts with the provisions of the Personal Status Code on this subject, as set forth in chapters 23 and 61 of the Code.

The report specifically focuses on the principle of gender equality and non-discrimination between the sexes, pointing out that many existing laws and in particular the CPS do not hold such principles. For example, Article 6 of the Tunisian constitution declares equality of citizens before the law, however it does not specify the principle of non-discrimination between the sexes (Tunisian Const, art. 6). It is true that Tunisian courts, like other public authorities in Tunisia, interpret this article to include non-discrimination between men and women. Nevertheless, the alternative report asserts that Tunisia has not fully met its commitment to explicitly incorporate the principle of non-discrimination in its Constitution.

The Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (AFTD) which has existed legally since 1989, is an independent feminist association bringing together women from all walks of life, united in tackling discrimination and promoting women's human rights and democracy. Notwithstanding the many achievements and gains made to date, we are convinced that much remains to be done in order to progress towards equality between the sexes. That is why we consider it necessary to submit an alternative report to the official Tunisian report on compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which will be examined by the CEDAW Committee in October 2010.

Tunisia has admittedly been a pioneer in tackling discrimination against women in the Arab world, particularly in the civil domain and more specifically within the family. However, many forms of discrimination remain evident, including in the family environment.

In 2014, Tunisia formally withdrew all reservations to CEDAW and many Tunisian women activists and feminist credit the work of the ATDF for this achievement. What is interesting about this alternative report is that this was a collaborative effort involving an international organization. The FIDH is a respectable international non-governmental organization for human rights made up of 184 member organisations in over 100 countries (International Federation of Human Rights, 2020). The organization is nonpartisan, non-sectarian, and independent of any government. Its core mandate is to advocate the rights of all peoples set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (International Federation of Human Rights, 2020). FIDH frequently coordinates and supports collaborations with intergovernmental organizations and local CSOs around the world. Since the Arab Spring, the ATFD has further strengthened its ties with international organizations like the FIDH, building networking relationships that connect their local experiences as women in Tunisia to broader international alliances focussed on women's rights as a human rights issue. The ATFD's decision to partner with the FIDH was strategic seeing that part of the CEDAW Committee's mandate is focussed on ensuring that all participating countries comply with the UDHR. In order to strengthen the validity of their arguments and engage within an international context, partnering with an established international organization like the FIDH draws the necessary attention the ATFD desired with the release of this alternative report. Ultimately, the appeal of transnational advocacy networking as observed in this instance, frames local issues as broader universal human rights concerns. This makes the issue at hand appear more important and draws to itself a broad range of interests and support.

## **4.7. Discussion**

Since 2010 women in Tunisia have been engaging in cross-border networking, taking an increasingly active role in the development of a global civil society network. The impact of rapid globalization from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century significantly changed the role

of the state in Tunisia and this of course had implications for Tunisia's economic policies and the state's overall approach to governance (Khalil, 2014; Gray, 2012). These changes culminated with Tunisia's 2011 revolution and this momentum quickly spread across the region, in part due to the accessibility of information technology at the time (Antonakis, 2018, pp. 139 -140). All of these changes affected Tunisian women in specific ways, pushing Tunisian women to reorganize their demands around economic policies, welfare, development and recognition of their status in the country (Antonakis, 2018). Hence, the emergence of this new alliance between Tunisian women and the broader transnational network of global civil society actors has formed a new shared agenda (Antonakis, 2018, pp. 142). Furthermore, this transnational nature of organizing is also being forged by the growing awareness amongst Tunisia women that both the nature and the sources of their economic and legal oppression are not only national concerns, but they have assumed a transborder dimension that needs to be addressed through engagement with regional and TANS (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016, pp. 648). As the data has shown, over the last decade Tunisian women have actively been involved in promoting international campaigns, engaging in collaborative advocacy work with international organizations, and fundraising for various activities and conferences. The formation of this gendered approach to transnational advocacy is often tied to the development of new political subjectivities advocating for reforms and change through the dissemination of new norms, while simultaneously asserting the transnational nature of women's affiliations, rights and political stances (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016, pp. 641 - 642). Moreover, transnational women's networks frame their agendas not only to counter national legislation related to women, but also in relation to the international and transnational context that upholds discrimination and contributes to conflicts that will ultimately impact the lives of women (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Tunisian women are critical and conscious of these dynamics both nationally and internationally, hence framing their oppression as a universal human rights issue, legitimizing their calls for action on all fronts. Drawing from the findings of the previous section, there is also a shift in terms of the ways Tunisian women engage with TANS. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tunisian women were only able to collectively engage with the broader global community through in person attendance at international and regional conferences and events (Charrad, 2001; Labidi, 2007). Furthermore, due to the impact of state feminism at the time, Tunisian women worked from a restricted capacity in terms of the scope of issues they could publically engage with (Labidi, 2007). Today, with the dawn of

information technology accelerated by the pace of globalization has allowed Tunisian women to utilize various different modes of engagement with TANs (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016). These channels provide women in Tunisia with the ability to partake virtually in a transnational public sphere, and this is especially important for bridging the gap between rural women in Tunisia to the broader discourse around women's rights and women's development in general. Online spaces and platforms have proven crucial in connecting the local with the transnational. In fact, it is sometimes the only space that Tunisian women have to express themselves freely, collect information, communicate with each other, and the rest of the world (Antonakis, 2018). Moreover, since the events of the Arab Spring the civil society landscape in Tunisia has drastically changed, Tunisian women now have free access to engage in public spheres about issues they want to advocate for. At the 2019 Tunis Forum for Gender Equality, there were several young Tunisian women in the audience from various different organizations who identified themselves as feminist women working within Tunisia's civil society arena. One woman in particular whose name is Aicha Ayari joined in the discussion, passionately advocating for increased collaboration between national, regional and international levels on issues pertaining to women's rights (Tunis Forum on Gender Equality, 2019).

It is very moving for me to see all these women around me gathered together in a global movement. This is where I see potential when local, national, regional and global come together to see what changes we can make -- to come together to find ways to fight against the stakes (Aicha Ayari, Tunis Forum on Gender Equality, 2019).

These and other examples (referring to examples in the previous section) hint at how Tunisian women are becoming actors in a transnational civil society. As intercultural mediators, as active members of women's organizations, as prominent figures of national, regional and transnational organizations, and as women actively involved in politics, these women represent the essence of this shift that is observe, transcending a nationally bounded conception of the public sphere towards a broader global public platform. These changes are taking place during a crucial period in Tunisia's transitional phase towards a stable and influential democracy in the region. Undoubtedly women in Tunisia are taking on crucial roles to facilitate this transition, and in the midst of this to secure their rights as women for the generation of women today and tomorrow.

Some scholars argue that this broader global agenda for deeper democratization is in part due to neo-liberalization and its ongoing influence in the Global South (Labidi, 2007). The question of whether these processes are responsible for shaping the dimensions assumed by contemporary forms of collective mobilization within Tunisia's women's movement is critical to understanding the autonomy of Tunisian women's organizing and the motivations behind these transnational alliances (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016, pp. 648). Lilia Labidi (2007) described these issues in her 2007 essay on the challenges that the Tunisian women's movement face in its shift from a local to a transnationally oriented network. Labidi notes how the possibilities that emerged from the creation of partnerships with European women's organizations and international donors have had a negative impact on the women's movement in Tunisia (Labidi, 2007, pp. 25 - 26). Moreover, although the development of civil society networks and especially women's networks and projects across the Mediterranean was a crucial element in the achievement of women's rights, it did not end hierarchies of power. In fact, she argues that these mechanisms affirmed previous asymmetries of power and also established new ones (Labidi, 2007). Essentially, the main question that needs to be asked is to what extent is the establishment of a transnational women's network in Tunisia the product of internal struggles and/or the result of geopolitical pressures on the country itself. Although my research does not thoroughly explore this question, there is evidence that Tunisian women are well aware of these dynamics. For example, in a speech delivered by Tunisian President Ben Ali on the fiftieth anniversary of the enactment of the CSP, Ben Ali reinforced his government's effort to support at regional and international levels to disseminate values of equality, solidarity, and modernity thereby establishing a foundation for a broad Arab renaissance in which men and women co-exist on an equal basis (Labidi, 2007, pp. 7 - 8). In other words, the Tunisian state itself contributed to the building blocks for a transnational dimension to the women's movement in Tunisia (Labidi, 2007). However as described previously, these achievements often came at a cost, exposing the women's movement in Tunisia to a new vulnerability, placing them at the receiving end of a power chain entrenched within the dynamics of TANs in the region. Moreover, transnationalizing the women's movement also meant that these women's organizations in Tunisia receive substantial financial support from international donors such as the European Union, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and various other international organizations that are affiliated with various different agendas (Labidi, 2007).

Realistically, this dependence has implications on the question of Tunisian women's autonomy when organizing and developing their own goals. Despite that, on the question of identity formation and in the creation of meanings, we see that Tunisian women do in fact engage in strategies to mitigate against these hierarchies of power within the transnational context. An overview of the data on the ways Tunisian women frame their issues indicate that Tunisian women are highly aware of these dynamics and are attentive to reinforce a sense of "locality" and "origin" to their organizing and framings. This is perhaps why many Tunisian women organizers and activists use the CSP and the pioneering aspect of the pre-independence anti-colonial history (that saw the rise of many women freedom fighters) as a point of identification to uniquely ground the present day Tunisian women's movement as its own. These strategies certainly mitigate against the overwhelming influence of their European and Western transnational allies, to hold a place of their own by their own. Furthermore, there is evidence that Tunisian women are not afraid to challenge these hierarchies of power and to voice their discontentment with their international allies. The alternative CEDAW report is one such example, where the ATFD challenges the CEDAW Committees report on the status of women's rights in the country, while outlining their dissatisfaction with the consultation process.

The government report that consolidates Tunisia's 5th and 6th periodic reports on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1999-2007), presented to the CEDAW Committee on 27 April 2009, states in point 2 of the introduction that ATFD was consulted during the drafting of the report. However, we were consulted solely on certain specific points and it was only later that we learned of the report's existence through staff working in international NGOs.

Another interesting aspect revealed during this research is how Tunisian women appear to be transcending the Islamist-secular divide on specific issues relating to women's rights in the country. A majority of the interviews with both Islamist and secular identified women reveal a pattern of agreement on the need for better access to education, increasing women's political participation in the country and strengthening laws on violence against women. There are of course other areas where their concerns diverge, but overall there seems to be a sense of understanding between Tunisian women about issues that matter and that are imperative to securing the rights of women in the country.

Despite the reality of this dichotomy, there is a notion to progress towards some form of collective change and this conscious need to move towards that change is accessible to all Tunisian women across the spectrum. This movement towards that change is a gradual shift that appears to be taking place within the various spaces of Tunisian society and is strengthening the civil society arena in the country. More importantly, Tunisian women across the spectrum are leaning towards this shift, of course in varying degrees, but it is evident that this desire to progress and transcend previous limitations is informing the development of women's rights in the country.

Overall, the findings presented in this thesis emphasize the ability of transnational advocacy networks to create a new language for women's rights that is universal and to design shared priorities for women across boundaries that seem to have become less divisive in contemporary times. Moreover, the transnational dimension of Tunisian women's collective mobilization is not only representative of contemporary shifts in today's international system, but is perhaps a broader outcome of globalization itself. Essentially, transnational networks have provide Tunisian women with more flexible and less bureaucratic organizing structures, therefore resulting in more effective campaigns that have a more immediate impact at local, national and international levels.

## **Chapter 5.**

### **Conclusion**

#### **5.1. Concluding Remarks**

The experiences of women in Tunisia post 2010 show the extent to which binaries and frames may shift and how these shifts impact the development of women's rights in the country. The Tunisian women's movement is giving birth to a new framework, to more effective forms of organization and mobilization, and to collaborative global campaigns that allow women to join forces despite and beyond their differences. This collective action is meant to be universally accessible, relying on the universality of rights and freedoms Tunisian women see themselves attaining. This perspective appears to be essential to contemporary organizing amongst Tunisian women, and yet, is also rooted in the past. Together, Tunisian women are weaving a framework connecting their past to the future, responding to emerging complex realities, to mutually construct possibilities and opportunities for women in the country. This research also confirms that Tunisian women are engaged in their agency and are a force to be reckoned with, yet, there is still a need to liberate their action from foreign instruction and dependence. The full achievement of their autonomy requires the dismantling of enduring forms of transnational "supervision" that has been instrumentalized through the influence of dominant neo-liberal ideologies. As previously outlined, state feminism of the pre-revolution period used the framework of accountability to ensure the loyalty of women through the cooptation of their cause whilst ensuring that the state remained fully in control (Charrad, 2001; Labidi, 2007). Post 2011 Tunisia has shifted the responsibility and accountability from the hands of the state to that of the lawmakers and civil society actors (Zaki, 2019). The events of the Arab Spring helped Tunisian women shape a new collective identity rooted in the history of pre-independence organizing and state feminism, shaped by the divide between Islamist and secular interactions, and now informed by the events of the Arab Spring period (Zaki, 2019). Throughout this process, the history of feminist action and women's activism in Tunisia reveals the extent to which the process is dynamic and vulnerable, requiring continuous attention in the areas of education, framing of issues and in the processes of decision-making (Zaki, 2019). In the midst of all these changes, various forms of power and authority have indeed challenged

women's agency in Tunisia, and consequently we that accountability over time is also changing its location and meaning. Despite these challenges, the shift towards transnational advocacy work and global campaigns beyond the state attests to the tenacity and agency of Tunisian women to broaden their reach, visibility and their potential (Labidi, 2007). For example, the Beijing Statement of 1995 and the outcome of the Tunis Forum of 2019 was a result of women's TANs and campaigning. Supporting the idea of women's rights as human rights and the notion of equality between genders as a prerequisite for overall development is seen as a critical aspect of women's efforts to bring about economic development and the modernization of family codes around the world. This ultimately impacts legislation and policies nationally on issues pertaining to women, but also contributes to a larger global push for women to achieve systemic equality and be the leaders shaping norms and meanings pertaining to their rights and development. Tunisian women are perhaps not only interested in ensuring women's rights in their country but to also become global ambassadors for women's rights and human rights. Ultimately, this thesis shows that the success of Tunisian women's transnational mobilization within the arena of women's rights rests upon their ability to frame their struggles considering the universality of human rights, to protect a sense of their "origin", and to continue involving women from across the spectrum in Tunisia to engage collaboratively on women's issues.

## **5.2. Prospects for Future Research**

This thesis has made an original contribution to the literature about Tunisian women's organizing with TANs and its impact on women's rights during the Arab Spring period in the country. This was possible due to the wealth of the empirical evidence presented and also assessing the data using a Constructivist theoretical framework focussed on the dissemination of norms, identity formation processes, and the creation of intersubjective meanings within the context of transnational social movements. A thorough survey of the literature on the development of women's rights during the Arab Spring period shows that currently there isn't an analysis of Tunisian women's engagement with TANs and how that is shaping the ways women's strategize and advocate for their rights. Currently, there is only one article by Lilia Labidi (2007) discussing the nature of Tunisian women's transnational alliances between the periods of 1980 to 2000 and uses the ATFD and AFTURD as case studies of these interactions.

However, this article does not discuss the role of Islamist women, nor does it account for their participation in this arena. Furthermore, this article does not reflect the changes that have emerged during the Arab Spring period.

In terms of potential for future research avenues related to this topic, there is a need to understand the motivations behind Tunisian women's participation in TANs. My research indicates that Tunisian women want to be actively involved in global discourses involving human rights in general, but also there are various internal dynamics within the country that may contribute to this need to network transnationally. My research is inconclusive on this matter and I believe it is important to understand the full context of this engagement to have a better sense of the direction of Tunisia's women's movement in the future. Aside from that, my research also does not answer the extent of the impact this engagement with TANs has on the development of women's rights in the country. Based on all the data collected, it appears that there is a significant impact on the development of women's rights during the Arab Spring period but at this point we can only assume this impact to be equally important with other competing factors.

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