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**TITOLO/TITLE:** Gender and multiple crises in Tunisia. Exploring the consequences of crises on women and men relations, gender roles and representations through a historical approach

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:** RENATA PEPICELLI E GUENDALINA SIMONCINI

**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):**

Tunisia is currently in the international spotlight due to the political and institutional crisis that began with the events of July 2021 when President Kais Saied decided to block parliamentary activities and rewrite the 2014 Constitution. This is not the first nor the only crisis that affects the country. Multiple crises (Brand, 2016) - at the economic, social, political, juridical and cultural levels - have marked the recent history of Tunisia.

By adopting a long-term perspective, it is possible to observe that the multiple crises experienced by Tunisia had important repercussions on different levels, including the dynamics between genders. Indeed, crises have a differentiated impact for men and women (Antonopoulos, 2014; Gálvez and López, 2010). For example, the measures adopted by state authorities to address crises have brought gender into play by influencing the relationships between men and women, the models of masculinity and femininity, roles and identities. But even from below, grass-roots reactions to crisis need to be studied through gender lenses.

While the research has extensively investigated the emergence of political fractions, the new reconfigurations of Islamism, the contradictory transitional trajectories, the recession and unemployment with their respective repercussions, little has been written about the repercussions of these changes on gender in Tunisia. The impact of the measures taken to deal with crises on gender tends to be overlooked or be treated partially in the literature dedicated to crisis management. For example, many studies that emerged over the last few years tended to focus on the gendered impacts of the economic crisis accompanying the pandemic (Kabeer, Razavi e van der Meulen, 2021) while overlooking the importance of deepening the impact of that crisis on gender relations, models and identities. The study of differential material impacts of crises on women and girls at the economic and social level (United Nations Women, 2020), although of fundamental importance, need to be accompanied by an in-depth understanding of the symbolic, discursive and identitarian impacts of crises on gender, taking into account the narratives of crisis governance and the renegotiations of power relations between genders.

This panel, therefore, aims to investigate in a broader perspective the effects that the crises and responses given by governments, international organizations, political movements, society in Tunisia, have had at the level of gender reconfigurations, roles, relationships and representations.

Crises, understood as "transformative moments in history", can offer the possibility of change (Seguino, 2010) both at the level of the labour market and the opportunities for equality, as well as at the level of status, identity, performance, representations and power relations between genders. But at the same time crises can represent an opportunity to reinforce unequal power structures (Griffin, 2015) and gender representations of a patriarchal and conservative nature.

Tunisia asserts itself as a very pertinent case study of the gender consequences of both national and global crises since it represents a country in which gender redefinitions have been at the centre of the national construction process itself (Charrad, 2001), strongly altering perception, performance and gender roles. The genre has been continuously mobilised in the contemporary history of Tunisia for political interests by the various political protagonists in times of crisis (Pepicelli, 2015; Yacoubi, 2016; Moghaddam, 2018).

More concretely this panel aims to study gender models that have been redefined or confirmed in response to the various crises experienced by the country, with particular attention to the dynamics between the base and the institution. In particular, the panel will explore the impact of crises on gender in different contexts and from

different perspectives. From one side the panel wants to investigate how the emergence of women's movements and their access to the labour market and into politics has undermined the mainstream interpretation of gender roles and relations within society, breaking with traditional patriarchal positions and renegotiating conservative stances. From the other side, the panel wants to underline in which way the crises have also served the institutions and some political movements to revive conservative gender narratives in the context of security, recession and the health crisis.

With a starting point in the human and social sciences and based on field research, on the analysis of the literature produced on the subject and archival research, this panel will propose an exploration from an inter- and trans-disciplinary approach the conceptual and theoretical tools to address the impact of crises on gender. It will study material and symbolic impact of crises on gender relations, roles and representation in the Tunisian context, analysing historical or actual contestations of public meanings of femininity / masculinity in the context of multiple crises and discussing reconfigurations or consolidation of traditional gender roles, identities and relations emerging from crises.

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#### PRESENTATIONS:

##### **Gender dynamics as revealing the paradoxes of the post-2011 socio-political change in Tunisia**

*Alia Gana, CNRS, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and Selma Hajri, RAWSA-MENA network*

A large body of research highlights the role of women in the mobilizations that preceded and followed the 'Arab Spring' (Benzenine, 2016; Bonnet, 2013; Gillot and Martinez, 2016). Other works argue that post-2011 electoral processes, and in particular the coming to power of Islamist parties, have allowed for greater access of women to the political space in several countries (Latte Abdallah, 2013, Pepicelli, 2011; Munteanu, 2020). On the other hand, several studies point out that post-2011 political processes have tended to challenge women's rights (individual freedoms, right to abortion, right to work), coupled with increased control over their behaviour and bodies (Debuysere, 2016; Gana and Sigillo, 2019).

In Tunisia, the pioneer country of the Arab Spring, the evolution of the status and situation of women, in the context of the societal, political and economic crises generated by the post-2011 upheavals, are marked by a paradox. This appears to be linked on the one hand to the reactivation of patriarchal and religious social norms (Chekir, 2016), and on the other hand to the resistance and mobilization of women to preserve their gains, advance their rights and conquer new positions in the public space.

Based on field research, this paper proposes to highlight gender dynamics in Tunisia as a way of revealing the paradoxes of post-2011 socio-political change. We will critically address the changes in women's political participation, in their labour market integration, and in their access to reproductive health. We will also explore women's involvement in the social movement and their mobilizations for political and individual rights.

### **The Tunisianité in crisis: how pious illiberal Muslim women challenge the gender roles and the national identity in the post-revolutionary Tunisia**

*Alessandra Bonci, Ph.D. Candidate- Université Laval (Québec, Canada)*

The standard of Tunisian-ness, also known as Tunisianité, has deep roots in Tunisian history. (Merone, 2015; Zemni, 2016; Helal, 2019). The process of democratization that started in 2011 maintained the stigma of Islamists as backward and non-modern, only updating the requirements of Tunisianité. Once Ennahdha, the Islamist party in government, reshaped the boundaries of Tunisianité to secure their survival (Cavatorta and Merone, 2015; Haugbølle, 2015), the illiberal, pious women activists became the new excluded from the opportunity of being model citizens. They do not fit in the frame of Tunisianité because their will of performing a non-Nahdawi, non-moderate understanding of Islam, does not match with the needs of a liberal and laïque political system. (Asad, 2003).

After a progressive securitization of the Tunisian politics, illiberal, pious Muslim women activists today do not engage in active political opposition, do not organize direct actions against the state nor encourage other people to do so. Yet, they feel marginalized and excluded from their own society and government. Despite the perception of exclusion, they employ their time and energies imagining an alternative and more Islamic society, resisting and challenging the restrictive state-led impositions and narratives such as the unique model for being a 'proper' Tunisian citizen. Therefore, this study aims at showing these women's agency by presenting their trajectories of political engagement within the koranic associations.

### **Political, security, pandemic crisis and reconfigurations of gender roles in Tunisia: between international narratives and local perspectives.**

*Clara della Valle, post-doc fellow - University of Bologna*

The 2010-2011 uprisings, and the period of political transition that followed, led to the emergence of a variegated and fluid panorama of women's associations that, despite intersecting generational, geographical, class, religious and social divides, has contributed (and is still contributing) to a reconfiguration of gender roles and power relations within Tunisian society. At the core of female struggles (e.g. men-women equality in social, political, economic rights; violence against women etc.) there is the idea of women as "agents of change", which privileges the concept of "participation" to those of "protection" or "prevention".

The security crisis started in 2014-2015 led, among other things, to the adoption of the first Tunisian National Action Plan (NAP) for implementing the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, the so-called "Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda". Despite the Resolution's anchoring in the four pillars of "protection, participation, prevention, relief and recovery" (UNSC 2000), the global debate on WPS has been shaped by a securitarian paradigm, mostly focusing on sexual violence against women during conflicts and the notion of a "post-conflict" situation (Shepherd 2020; Pearson 2020). This has reinforced the idea of women as "victims" rather than "agents", thereby failing in recognizing their everyday resistance as a valid exercise of political power (Gopinath & Manchanda 2019).

Through doc analysis and interviews to different stakeholders on the ground, this contribution aims at investigating the relationship between international agenda and local change, trying to understand whether the WPS Agenda has been used to motivate and inform the strategies of Tunisian female leaders, women's groups and women-led movements for change, especially after 2011. It argues that the WPS dossier has aroused little interest among Tunisian female civil society so far, mainly due to the problematic

intersection between, on the one side, the securitarian framing of the Agenda and, on the other side, the interests, actions and forms of agencies of Tunisian women, in terms of reconfiguration of gender roles and power relations.

The contribution explores the potentialities of a greater involvement of Tunisian civil society in the WPS dossier and a realignment of the global WPS discourse to the contextual specificities of the so-called "Global South", in order to giving visibility to women's everyday resistance and going beyond conservative narratives. It also lingers on the opportunities provided by the health crisis that erupted in 2020 following the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the consequent socio-economic crisis. By severely undermining many dimensions of women's security, the health crisis is triggering a re-writing of the international security discourse within a "human security" (UNDP 1994) paradigm, that moves away from the traditional "hard security" repertoire, integrating more concretely the dimension of "participation" and better fitting the reality of Tunisian women.

### **Framing feminisms in time crisis: Analysis of women's right activism in post-2011 Tunisia**

*Ester Sigillò, Postdoctoral Fellow Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna*

After the fall of the Ben Ali in 2011, the debate on women's rights in Tunisia regained momentum thanks to the participation of new actors in a renewed public sphere. Notably, the introduction of the decree-law 88/2011, which facilitated the creation of associations, allowed new spaces of mobilizations for those actors subjected to harsh repression during the regime, such as Islamic activists. Thus, after 2011 civil society became a lively space of confrontation of different models of women's right, ranging from the concept of equality to that of gender complementarity as a set of social norms. This article retraces how different forms of women's activism over the decade characterizing a bumpy transition process has paralleled a high contention at political and societal level as well as several crises. In doing so, it shows how - in continuity with the old regime's practices - the gender issue was instrumentalized from different kind of actors to "solve the crises". Drawing on semi-structured interviews with local associations (both secular and Islamic), international donors, political parties, and national authorities - conducted from 2015 to 2021 in several governorates across the country - this article describes how the multiple crises Tunisia has been facing since its Revolution to date have affected narratives and representations of the issue of women's rights, by letting emerge different forms of feminisms

### **Masculinities at the margins: harqa and violent extremism as fields of political struggle in post-revolutionary Tunisia**

*Giovanni Cordova, Guendalina Simoncini, Doctoral Researcher - University of Pisa*

In recent years, scholars from different backgrounds as well as national and international institutional actors have theorized the existence of a nexus between current social, economic and political trouble and the crisis of masculinity in Tunisia. In this sense, many observers have identified several affinities between the post-colonial State's crisis of legitimacy (especially after the 2010-2011 Spring) and the fragility of the social and cultural construction of the male gender (Kerrou 2018; Marchi 2014; Ben Ismail 2017). In times of extreme political and economic uncertainty, young Tunisians of middle and working classes have to face a problematic transition toward adulthood, being also subjected to strong social and familiar pressure. How do their daily rhetoric and practices relate to imagines, ideals and imperatives of masculinity?

Drawing on ethnographic research and multimodal discourse analysis, we would like to focus on two of the main social fields that in the Tunisian post-revolutionary season have become examples of permanent emergency, aiming to grasp the implicit and explicit patterns of masculinity that lie behind them. On the one hand, the 'irregular' migration, harqa, to be intended as a means to become 'men' finding elsewhere alternative but risking ways of Self-fulfillment, economic income and social recognition. However, the gender status of the harraga is always ambiguous. As he 'burns' borders trying to achieve those social markers of masculinity the lack of which is reproached also by his family, he progressively becomes alien for both the societies of origin and arrival. On the other hand, the rise of violent extremism that Tunisia has witnessed in the last ten years contributed to fostering the spread of belligerent masculinity as a specific form of hegemonic masculinity. Violent extremist groups used highly gendered rhetoric in their propaganda glorifying men's political and religious violence as a means for reasserting virility and masculinity, contributing to question hypermasculinity (Scheff, 2006). At the same time, the repressive measures that have been taken to counter terrorism by public authorities exalted the portrait of "just

warrior” (Elshtain, 1982) engaged in the necessary task of collective violence in order to protect from terrorism, leading to a general militarization of the whole society (Eichler, 2013). We wish to critically observe how discourses and rhetoric concerning masculinity (while conveying and proposing hegemonic patterns of masculinity) in the public sphere has been turning into a field of political, social and cultural struggle in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

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**PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS**

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