

Research report

Mobilizing Women: women in post-2011 Tunisian society

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Introduction

Since 2011, Tunisia's democratic transition process has laid the foundations for important innovations in terms of legislation, particularly with respect to the rights of women, active participants in the revolution. First the 2014 constitution, then the 2017 Law 58 against gender-based violence and finally the 2018 National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, represented - along with others - important steps forward both in consolidating the country's formal gender-based human rights obligations and towards the full recognition of women's role in decision-making processes.

In this sense, the WPS agenda in Tunisia was set in a context of building a post-revolution democratic process by aiming to mainstream the gender approach.

Nevertheless, there remains a deep gap between *de jure* rights and factual reality. Cultural, social, economic elements slow down and hinder the progress towards gender equality and full participation of women in all spheres of political, social and economic life in the country. With great differences between regions, women continue to be under-represented in important sectors of the labour market, their participation in active political life remains weak, and they remain extremely exposed to various forms of gender-based discrimination and violence. This picture is aggravated by an international economic and health situation and a domestic political situation that are also negatively affecting the protection of women and, more generally, the promotion of gender issues.

In order to understand the progress and status of gender policies in Tunisia and to analyse their real impact on the condition of women, the project *Mobilizing Women: le donne nella società tunisina nel post 2011* (Mobilizing Women: women in post-2011 Tunisian society) sought to frame the historical process of policies to protect women in the country, with a particular focus on the transposition of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda and its implementation.

The present report is divided as follows: after a quick look at the evolution of gender policies from post-independence until 2011 (chapter 1) and the presentation of some contextual data on the condition of women in Tunisia (chapter 2), the paper focuses on the post-revolutionary period up to the present day, dwelling in particular on the processes that led to the definition and adoption of the National Action Plan (NAP), its results and critical issues (chapter 3). In the last paragraph the paper formulates policy recommendations for Italy, in terms of supporting the WPS agenda in the country (Chapter 4).

In the drafting of this paper, the analytical approach on the institutional context framework and the study of the literature on the evolution of the feminist movement in the country was corroborated and enriched by field missions, with the aim of providing a cross-section of the country's situation on gender rights, through the collection of 'views from below', an approach to research that combines a scientific framework with listening to and directly involving the 'protagonists'. The interview activity in Tunisia was conducted in two stages and with a twofold purpose. The first mission, carried out at the end of September 2022, was aimed at the creation of audio-visual content returned in a multimedia version in a *webdoc*¹ edited by the FADA collective with the aim of creating a tool for the usable dissemination of research content and the prominence of voices from the field. The webdoc collects short written texts, podcasts and video interviews of women representatives of institutions, civil society and feminist activism engaged in various capacities in promoting gender equality and defending the rights of women and minorities in Tunisia. The second mission, held at the end of October 2022, involved in *face-to-face* and virtual interviews²

¹ The webdoc produced by FADA is available at: <https://www.mobilizingwomentunisia.eu/>.

² The interviews involved representatives of two Women's Rights, Gender and Anti-Discrimination Organizations, gender rights experts and activists, a former trade union representative, and a former member of the Tunisian

women activists on gender issues, civil society representatives engaged in the promotion of women's rights and different actors engaged in supporting the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the country in order to return, through an approach as bottom-up as possible, an initial analysis on the characteristics of the Tunisian NAP and its implementation.

parliament. In addition, interviews were conducted both in-person and remotely with officials from the Embassy of Finland in Tunisia, UN WOMEN Tunisia, AICS Tunis, and created additional exchanges between some of the Tunisian female interviewees, researchers on gender issues, and representatives of Italian institutions during an online roundtable organized as part of the project. Interviews form an integral part of the paper, either in narrative or in quotation format, while still respecting the principle of confidentiality of the interviewees' names.

1. Women at the centre between institutionalisation of rights and social reality

1.1. Women's rights as a political tool

The history of the debate on women's rights in Tunisia has its roots in the pre-independence period, but it was only after its conquest that women were able to obtain a formal codification of their rights.

The advancement of women's rights went hand in hand with the modernisation of the post-colonial state, which, however, was characterised by an increasing exploitation of gender issues for the benefit of the central power in order to strengthen itself during times of crisis and to counter the growing opposition, especially of an Islamist nature.

This condition, which saw the state as the guarantor of women's rights, converged in the concept of State Feminism. In other words, a top-down process that left no room for an independent organisation of women in the country, but rather favoured the emergence of a single body, the *Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne* (UNFT), which represented and carried forward women's demands within the perimeter traced by the ruling elites and in a manner functional to their plan to modernise the country.

The crisis of the post-colonial development model paved the way for the emergence of a neo-liberal economic model that broke the social contract between state and citizen. In this furrow, marked by cuts in services and greater market influence in the national economy, a wave of popular discontent developed that challenged the regime in power.

Within this framework, with the aim of weakening the leftist forces, which were already in crisis, Ben Ali's regime tried to gain Islamist sympathies, playing precisely on gender rights. It is no coincidence, therefore, that in these very first years in power, the regime repeatedly expressed reservations about the role of women in society precisely to favour the emergence of Islamist movements in an antagonistic function with respect to progressive movements.

Once the danger of a renewed left-wing opposition vanished, the same tactics would be used in an anti-Islamist function from the mid-1990s until the early 2000s.

The gender issue becomes an important element of legitimacy, otherwise undermined by deteriorating economic conditions, of the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

This resulted in a defence by the regime of the 1956 CPS (*Code du Statut Personnel*, Code of Personal Status) and the official recognition of two independent associations, the *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* (ATFD) and the *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement* (AFTURD), which effectively took the 'privileged' place of the UNFT.

In addition to this, the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Seniors (MAFFEPA, *Ministère des Affaires de la Femme, de la Famille, de l'Enfance et des Personnes Âgées*) and the Centre for Research, Studies, Documentation and Information on Women (CREDIF, *Centre de Recherches, d'Études, de Documentation et d'Information sur les Femmes*) were established in the 1990s.

This series of measures aimed at strengthening the agency of *institutional feminism* at the expense, once again, of the independent development of feminist associations and organisations. Meanwhile, from a strictly economic and social point of view, with the start of the economic liberalisation processes, women occupied more and more positions within the labour market. The number of female workers grew more in the textile and agricultural sectors: their hours were more flexible and their pay lower than that of men; in addition, cheap female labour compensated for male migration

to urban centres³. Feminist and trade unionist movements were unable to address this problem due to both restrictions on the rights of expression and the informal nature of women's work in rural areas. Consequently, this period witnessed the consolidation of the phenomenon of the feminisation of rural poverty, a condition that further reinforced the traditionalism of gender roles⁴.

Before the 2011 Revolution, we can distinguish the more socially active and more militant groups (such as the ATFD and AFTURD) from the smaller groups that operated locally to offer support to women, detached from political and institutional ideologies: some of them were dedicated to purely social action⁵. Hence the reflection that these groups actually constituted the real engine of women's gradual economic emancipation, while militancy was often described as bourgeois and elitist, far removed from the reality of the working classes⁶. During the 2000s, women's activist movements resumed their militant action also thanks to the support of the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union) and the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH)⁷. For example, the support of the local UGTT committee to the protests in the phosphate basin in the Gafsa area during 2008 was of particular importance. On this occasion, local women, especially the mothers and wives of workers in the Gafsa Phosphate Company (CPG) were the protagonists of a series of demonstrations triggered by the company's layoffs and staff reductions, the germ of a broader protest against the neoliberal and authoritarian system⁸.

1.2. Gender Activism: The role of women in the Revolutionary years

The 2011 Revolution saw the mass participation of feminist movements within the largest popular uprising, hitherto restricted by the authoritarianism of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. From the point of view of women's activism, 2011 represented the culmination of the reaction to state feminism⁹, since the formal recognition of women's rights had not been matched by real emancipation or change in the social system. Alongside the pre-existing associations, there is a blossoming of movements and groups in different and, in many cases, conflicting fields of action, reflecting the polarisation between secularism (a founding element of Tunisian feminism) - and post-independence Islamism¹⁰.

On the one hand, the secular militancy brought forward the need not only to further formalise women's rights, but also to concretise them. The inclusion of gender equality in the new constitution, greater representation of women within the new institutions, the removal of reservations to the CEDAW, and the abolition of the wearing of the full veil in school and university spaces are some of the demands that secular associations have put forward¹¹.

On the other hand, the end of oppression stimulated the emergence of movements close to the ideology of political Islam. These groups opposed the modernist project and the demands of secular

³ Debuysère, L. (2018). Between feminism and unionism: the struggle for socio-economic dignity of working-class women in pre- and post-uprising Tunisia. *Review of African Political Economy*, 45:155, 25-43. doi:[10.1080/03056244.2017.1391770](https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2017.1391770).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Mahfoudh Draoui, D. & Mahfoudh, A. (2014). Mobilisations des femmes et mouvement féministe en Tunisie. *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, 33, 14-33. doi: [10.3917/nqf.332.0014](https://doi.org/10.3917/nqf.332.0014).

⁶ Yacoubi, I. (2016). Sovereignty From Below: State Feminism and Politics of Women Against Women in Tunisia. *The Arab Studies Journal*, 24 (1), 254-274. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44746854>.

⁷ Mahfoudh & Mahfoudh (2014).

⁸ Allal, A. (2010). Réformes néolibérales, clientélismes et protestations en situation autoritaire : Les mouvements contestataires dans le bassin minier de Gafsa en Tunisie (2008). *Politique africaine*, 117, 107-125. doi: [10.3917/polaf.117.0107](https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.117.0107).

⁹ Yacoubi (2016).

¹⁰ Chekir, H. (2016). Les droits des femmes en Tunisie : acquis ou enjeux politiques ? *Hérodote*, 160-161, 365-380. doi: [10.3917/her.160.0365](https://doi.org/10.3917/her.160.0365).

¹¹ Mahfoudh & Mahfoudh (2014); Chekir (2016); Moghadam, V. (2018). *The State and the Women's Movement in Tunisia: Mobilization, Institutionalization, and Inclusion*. Carnegie Corporation of New York, Center for Middle East at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

civil society, claiming their Arab-Muslim identity and, therefore, also the restoration of those practices suppressed by the CPS¹². Among these new Islamist-led groups, some emerge that militate for the recognition of the impact of anti-Islamist repression in the transitional justice process, such as the *Femmes de Tunisie* association that promotes the rehabilitation of women victims of abuse under the Ben Ali regime¹³.

Other groups that formed during this period chose to operate outside the binary schemes and ideologies of the organisations born in the post-independence period, due to the elitist and bourgeois perception of state feminism and, therefore, of the associations institutionalised under this scheme¹⁴. For this reason, there has been a shift away from political dynamics, especially in areas far from urban and industrial centres, favouring a bottom-up approach and prioritising support actions towards women from disadvantaged socio-economic groups. This approach has also benefited from the proliferation, inclusion and networking of local, national and international non-governmental organisations for women's rights: there has been a 37% growth of NGOs working in this field in the first year after the Revolution alone¹⁵. ATFD has expanded its presence in areas far from the capital, opening sections in Bizerte, Sousse, Kairouan and Sfax and attempting - not without difficulty¹⁶ - to get closer to the reality of women in marginalised areas.

The role of feminist and women's rights movements was also central at the political and institutional level. The main goals of the movements were those related to amending the Constitution and women's participation in the political-electoral process.

Especially in the post-revolutionary Constituent Assembly, the polarisation between 'secular' and Islamist demands was at the heart of the debate on the new Constitution.

The first version of the new Constitution that appeared in 2012, in which the concept of equality between men and women was replaced by the concept of complementarity, which defined the role of women as exclusively complementary to that of men, triggered the reaction of Tunisian women and associations while, on the contrary, *Ennahda* members supported its adoption¹⁷. Thanks to the mobilisation of Tunisian women and the participation of civil society in the drafting process in the following year, the clause was omitted and the final text of the Constitution (2014) granted important and solid guarantees to women's rights: equal rights and duties between women and men as citizens were recognised (Art. 21); the State's commitment to cherish, support and improve women's rights in all spheres and to take the necessary measures for the elimination of gender-based violence (Art. 46) and to ensure women's political representation at the national and local levels (Art. 34, paragraph 2); as well as to guarantee the right of every citizen to have access to decent working conditions and commensurate remuneration (Art. 40). Moreover, a few months after the Constitution came into force, the transitional government granted the lifting of the reservations placed on the CEDAW¹⁸.

¹² Mahfoudh & Mahfoudh (2014); Chekir (2016); Yacoubi (2016); Daniele, G. (2014). Tunisian Women's Activism after the January 14 Revolution: Looking within and towards the Other Side of the Mediterranean. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 15(2), 16-32. Available at the following link: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol15/iss2/2>.

¹³ Kebaili, S. (2018). Expérience de la répression et mobilisations de femmes dans la Tunisie post-révolution. *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 181, 121-140. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.38534>.

¹⁴ Yacoubi (2016).

¹⁵ Moghadam (2018). Arfaoui K., Tchaicha, J. (2019). *The Tunisian Women's Rights Movement. From Nascent Activism to Influential Power-broking*. Routledge.

¹⁶ As several authors point out, the conservative culture of these areas did not allow for an alignment with the 'secular' spirit of the association; moreover, the substantive reality of rural women's lives clashed with the more idealised claims of the ATFD, thus limiting their attempts to get involved in mobilisation (Chouikha L., Gobe É. (2009). *La Tunisie entre la révolte du bassin minier de Gafsa et l'échéance électorale de 2009, L'Année du Maghreb 2009*, Paris, CNRS éditions, pp. 387-420; Debuysère, 2018).

¹⁷ Charrad, M., Zarrugh A. (2013). *The Arab Spring and Women's Rights in Tunisia*. Available at the following link: <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/09/04/the-arab-spring-and-womens-rights-in-tunisia/>.

¹⁸ Moghadam (2018).

Important steps forward were also made in the area of political participation: the proportional system of candidacies allowed for 47% female representation, although only 12% of women were listed as candidates, and for 31% of seats in the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP).

Although the improvement was minimal compared to the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, the result placed Tunisia 30th out of 190 countries in terms of women's representation¹⁹. Moreover, the new executive led by the *Nidaa Tounes* party saw the participation of some key figures from the pre-revolutionary militancy. Among them, Khadija Chérif was appointed - at first - to the MAFFEPA and Latifa Lakhdar to the Ministry of Culture, both frontline ATFD activists²⁰.

The five-year period 2014-2019 witnesses an institutional evolution in the promotion of women's empowerment. Indeed, the political agenda is emptied of the anti-Islamist component that underpinned State Feminism: the promotion of the democratic framing of the Islamist *Ennahda* party is evidence of how the new Tunisian state is working to promote a democratic space open to all components of society. Legal protections in favour of women victims of gender-based violence are strengthened, in particular with Law no. 58 of 2017, which establishes a fundamental legal basis for increasing the tools available to Tunisian actors engaged in the promotion of gender rights²¹. Emblematic of the change from the past is then the proposed law in 2018 on gender equality in inheritance matters²² - a protection that is still lacking and necessary for a concrete emancipation of women, especially in rural areas - which represents a concrete attempt at mediation between secularism and political Islam.²³ The attempt at mediation and openness to all components of society that characterises this period remains, however, a legitimising tool for a young and fragile democratic system.

¹⁹ Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015. Available at:

https://data.ipu.org/node/176/elections?chamber_id=13546&election_id=30986.

²⁰ Moghadam (2018).

²¹ Organic Law No. 58 of August 2017 becomes a fundamental safeguard that, in an effort to strengthen the new Constitutional Charter, allows for the amendment of the Criminal Code in the area of sexual offences, in favour of new forms of protection for women. Another noteworthy reform, the culmination of a process of emancipation that began fifty years earlier with the Personal Status Code, is the government's repeal in September 2017 of Circular No. 5 of November 1973, which prevented Tunisian women from being able to celebrate interfaith unions. For more information:

- Loi Organique n° 2017-58. Available at the following link: <https://legislation-securite.tn/fr/law/56326>;

- 'Les Tunisiennes musulmanes pourront dorénavant se marier avec des non-musulmans'. (2017, 15 September). Le Monde. Available at the following link: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/09/15/la-tunisie-met-fin-a-l-interdiction-du-mariage-avec-des-non-musulmans_5185969_3212.html.

²² Morocco World News (2018, 24 November). 'Tunisian Government Approves Equal Inheritance Law'. Available at the following link: <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2018/11/258726/tunisian-government-equal-inheritance-law>.

²³ Specifically, the law proposal stipulated that the individual could still choose, by means of a notarial will procedure, to continue to follow Islamic dictates regarding inheritance.

2. From *de jure* to *de facto*: gender differences and inequality in Tunisia

In Tunisia, especially since 2011, in the aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution and with the opening up of the system to different realities of civil society, the issue of gender rights, until then instrumentalised or at least contained within a perimeter designed by the ruling elites to legitimise their power, has long been debated above all in terms of the diffusion of women's claims and how the new state should address them.

While great strides were made in terms of legislative provisions that effectively translated the claims of a plural feminist movement full of diverse voices in the aftermath of 2011, the impact of this development did not immediately translate into a substantial change in society in favour of women even before the changed political context from 2019 onwards recreated conditions for a backward shift in gender politics in the country.

In fact, the economic crisis that has hit the country in recent years has also and above all contributed to exacerbating inequalities. According to the main economic indicators, Tunisia has a high youth unemployment rate that, in 2021, was close to 40%²⁴. Added to this, especially with the outbreak of the pandemic, is a high inflation rate (8.1% in 2022, in 2021 it was 7.4%) that has negatively affected the purchasing power of wages²⁵. This not only affected the employment rate and the poverty rate (according to the latest available data, the index reached 17.5%), but also affected the economic inclusion of women.

An indicator that provides a snapshot of the country's general situation is the gender gap²⁶ surveyed by the Georgetown Institute for WPS together with the Oslo Peace Resource Institute (PRIO) which places Tunisia in 120th place out of 170 countries surveyed with an index of 0.643 (maximum 1)²⁷. Looking then at the MENA region, according to the data, the country has lost three positions since 2021, ceding the regional lead (excluding Israel) to Lebanon.

²⁴ See: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=TN>.

²⁵

See:

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099515309022233400/pdf/IDU0f8cf9a5703e950485f0b2d0025e156f8091d.pdf>.

²⁶ Gender gap; with particular reference to gender differences and the social and professional inequality between men and women.

²⁷ Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security. (2021). *Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022*. Available at the following link: <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/WPS-Index-2021.pdf>.

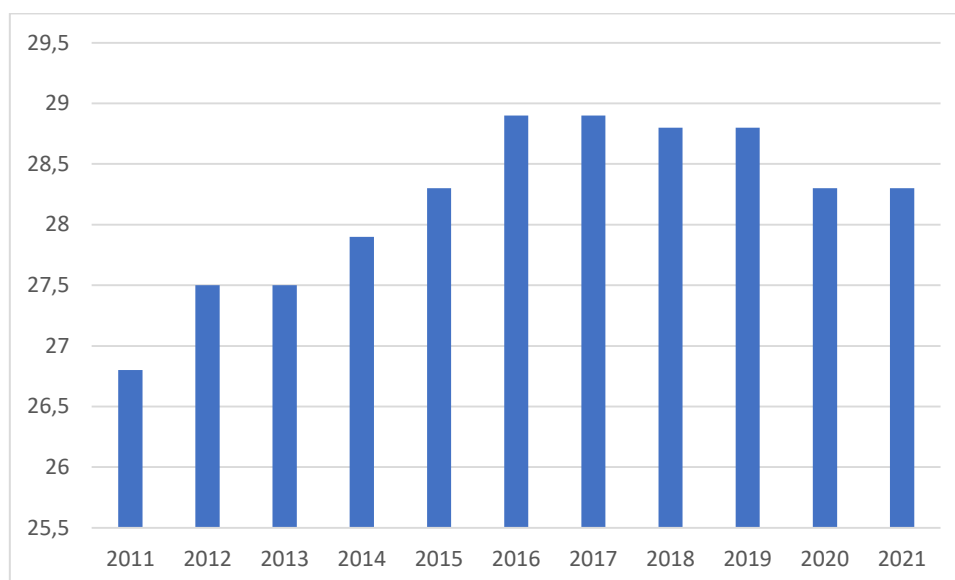
Table 1. Gender gap in North Africa and the Middle East (2022).

Country	index	Location
Lebanon	0,644	119
Tunisia	0,643	120
Jordan	0,639	122
Egypt	0,635	129
Morocco	0,624	136
Algeria	0,602	140
Libya	0,596	150
Iraq	0,516	166

Source: Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and PRIO.

The biggest problems relate to the lack of material means for real economic empowerment of women. According to the Arab Barometer surveys (2021)²⁸, there are still structural limitations that hinder women's access to the labour market, such as the lack of means of transport (76%), constraints resulting from the imbalance in care responsibilities within the family (71%), as well as the persistence of low wages (69%). This last point is borne out when analysing recent data on income inequality: according to data compiled by the UN (2021)²⁹, 55.9% of men in the country have their own income, while the percentage of women is around 19.3%.

Chart 1. % of women in the labour market (2011-2021)



Source: World Bank data

²⁸ Arab Barometer VI. Tunisia Country Report. (July 2020 - April 2021). Arab Barometer Surveys. Available at the following link: https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Tunisia_ArabBarometer_Public-Opinion-2021.pdf.pdf.

²⁹ UN-OHCHR (2021). *Rapport National Volontaire Sur La Mise En Œuvre Des Objectifs De Développement Durable En Tunisie*. High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, p. 191. Available at the following link: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/279442021_VNR_Report_Tunisia.pdf.

Furthermore, according to World Bank data, women's labour participation stands at around 28% (the highest in the 2010-2021 timeframe is 28.9%). Within this framework, women often hold subordinate positions and are often relegated to personal care and domestic work.

Similar data are also reported by the organisation City Alliance which, in a report from 2021, points out that 'Women face substantially more obstacles than men in accessing jobs, credit, and property; they earn 20 to 40% less and do not have sufficient voice in household and political decision making. They suffer from a highly gendered division of labour in which most of their time is dedicated to household tasks.'³⁰

Reinforcing this picture is the World Bank's survey on the indicators of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development. According to the data, only 10% of all companies in the private sector have women in their top management and only 17% within the middle and senior management of the same companies³¹. This figure is even more worrying when compared to the data on individual training and education levels, where women are more than twice as likely as men to hold a higher degree and account for two-thirds of all university graduates in the country³². Despite this, the illiteracy rate, according to the World Bank, is still very high among women, compared to men, especially in rural and hinterland areas. According to the latest available data (2014), women have four times higher illiteracy rates than men (10% men and 40% women).

The gender gap widens if we move from urban centres to rural areas. Notwithstanding official estimates - which see only one third of rural women registered in the national insurance system³³ - an estimated 500,000 women contribute to the development of the agricultural sector³⁴. Women's informal family or seasonal work in the form of illegal hiring ('*caporalato*') exacerbates the marginalisation and precariousness of women³⁵.

Economic independence for rural women thus becomes a distant mirage, especially in the absence of an equal inheritance law guaranteeing equal rights in terms of inheritance of agricultural land. Moreover, the urban-rural gap is also evident in terms of technological access, which, like the employment gap, can affect the achievement of gender equality. In the more developed regions of the Northeast and Tunis, increased access to the Internet has in fact decreased information gatekeeping, thus allowing for a reduction of gender inequality in education by 15-20%³⁶.

Exacerbating the situation have been the restrictions due to the pandemic, which have had serious consequences, especially in areas where the illegal hiring, and the consequent lack of labour protection, is widespread. Consequently, even in the extremely conservative southern parts of the country, women's voices have risen to denounce the unemployment exacerbated by the pandemic.³⁷

³⁰ See: <https://www.citiesalliance.org/newsroom/news/results/tunisia-unlocking-potential-women-agents-change>.

³¹ See: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/TN>.

³² Tunisian National Institute of Statistics: <http://dataportal.ins.tn/fr/DataQuery>.

³³ Mbarek, F. (2020). *Rural Women in Tunisia: The Dilemmas of Informal and Feminized Labour*. Assafir Al Arabi, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. Available at the following link: <https://assafirarabi.com/en/47274/2022/09/06/rural-women-in-tunisia-the-dilemmas-of-informal-and-feminized-labour/#note1>.

³⁴ La Presse (2020, 14 August). '*Femmes agricultrices : Une main forte dans la sécurité alimentaire*'. Available at the following link: <https://lapresse.tn/70577/femmes-agricultrices-une-main-forte-dans-la-securite-alimentaire/>.

³⁵ Le Monde (2019, 9 May). '*En Tunisie, le sort tragique des ouvrières agricoles*'. Available at the following link: https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/05/09/en-tunisie-le-sort-tragique-des-ouvrieres-agricoles_5459999_3212.html.

³⁶ FTDES - Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux. (March 2022). *Les inégalités en Tunisie*. (pp. 191-192). Available at the following link: <https://ftdes.net/rapports/inegalites.fr.pdf>.

³⁷ France 24 (2020, 20 July). '*Women carve out role in south Tunisia protest movement*.' Available at the following link: <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20200720-focus-women-carve-out-role-in-south-tunisia-protest-movement>.

In addition, some health-related rights, such as access to obstetrical-gynaecological services, have been restricted: of the 18 primary health centres where obstetrical services are provided, only five maintained the same pace of activity during the period of forced confinement³⁸.

At the same time, incidents of domestic violence have increased significantly. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the rate of domestic violence increased during the period of lockdown. Internal data from MAFFEPA (Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Seniors) show, for example, that in just 45 days, from 22 March to 3 May 2020, 6693 reports were collected³⁹. Thanks to pressure from civil society associations, the state took some sudden measures during the pandemic period, including the provision of a hotline for women victims of violence and a free psychological assistance service. Nevertheless, it is estimated that the number of feminicides has increased and that this, according to the independent publication Inkyfada⁴⁰, is due not only to the intensification of gender-based violence, but also to the failure of the authorities to respond to the appeals of women in distress. To date, as reported by the interviews conducted in the field, there is in fact the inefficiency of the Observatory set up by Law 58/2017, to collect data on gender-based violence.

If socio-economic barriers persist and weigh more or less heavily depending on the region on the *feminisation of poverty* in Tunisia, various socio-cultural barriers also contribute in parallel. As pointed out both in academic circles and by international organisations in the field⁴¹, in addition to the growing economic and health access gap, gender discrimination has in fact also strengthened within public and institutional opinion. As of 2019, for example, only 28% of the Tunisian population expressed support for a fair reform of the inheritance law⁴² and Arab Barometer polls conducted between July 2020 and March 2021⁴³ showed widespread opinion that women should not have an equal role with men in either the public or private sphere. More than half of the respondents also agreed that women's main responsibility was to take care of the home and children. In the same vein, during the debate on Decree-Law 208 of 8 May 2020, which, in laying down the modalities and procedures of lockdown, obliged mothers of children under the age of fifteen to be totally confined, a minister publicly justified, contrary to the complaints of feminist associations, the non-sexist nature of the decree's provisions⁴⁴.

Paradoxically, men of Generation Y (25-35) formed in the wake of the Arab Springs show less support for gender equality, especially in the public sphere, than previous generations.⁴⁵ The reason is probably to be found in the socioeconomic imbalances that persist in Tunisian society and that

³⁸ Chekir, H., (2020). L'impact du Covid-19 sur les droits des femmes. In Redissi, H., (Eds.). *La Tunisie à l'épreuve du Covid-19. Observatoire Tunisien de la Transition Démocratique*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Available at the following link: <https://ottdemocratique.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Covid-14-7-final.pdf>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Inkyfada (December 2021). *Femmes en sursis, de l'emprise au féminicide*. Available at the following link: <https://inkyfada.com/fr/2021/12/14/femmes-en-sursis-de-lemprise-au-feminicide-inkyfada-podcast/>.

⁴¹ Sediri, S., Zgueb, Y., Aissa, A., Ouali, U., & Nacef, F. (2021). Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on gender-based violence in Tunisia. *European Psychiatry*, 64 (S1), S835-S835. doi: 10.1192/j.eurpsy.2021.2206.

UN Women (March - April 2020). *Gender And Crisis of Covid-19 In Tunisia: Challenges and Recommendations*. Policy Brief. Available at the following link: https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/2020/05/Tunis%20COVID-19brief/UN%20WOMEN_Policy%20Brief_Gender%20and%20COVID%20in%20Tunisia.pdf.

⁴² Arab Barometer (February 2020). *What Arabs think about the status of women in society*. Available at the following link: <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/02/what-arabs-think-about-the-status-of-women-in-society/>.

⁴³ Arab Barometer VI. *Tunisia Country Report. (July 2020 - March 2021)*. Arab Barometer Surveys. Available at the following link: https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Tunisia_ArabBarometer_Public-Opinion-2021.pdf.pdf.

⁴⁴ Chekir, H. (2020). L'Impact du Covid-19 sur les droits des femmes, *La Tunisie à l'épreuve du Covid-19, Observatoire Tunisien de la Transition Démocratique, Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung*, 117-134. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/tunesien/16394.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Mutlu B.E (2022). *Youth perceptions of gender equality in Tunisia*. Arab Reform Initiative. Available at the following link: <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/youth-perceptions-of-gender-equality-in-tunisia/>.

afflict the younger generations in particular. The lack of male support for gender equality in the world of work, both in terms of employment and wages, is the result of a need to pursue one's own material objectives of subsistence first and foremost: socio-economic obstacles thus exacerbate socio-cultural barriers. It is at the very heart of the public sphere, such as politics, that such socio-cultural barriers keep women themselves on the margins.

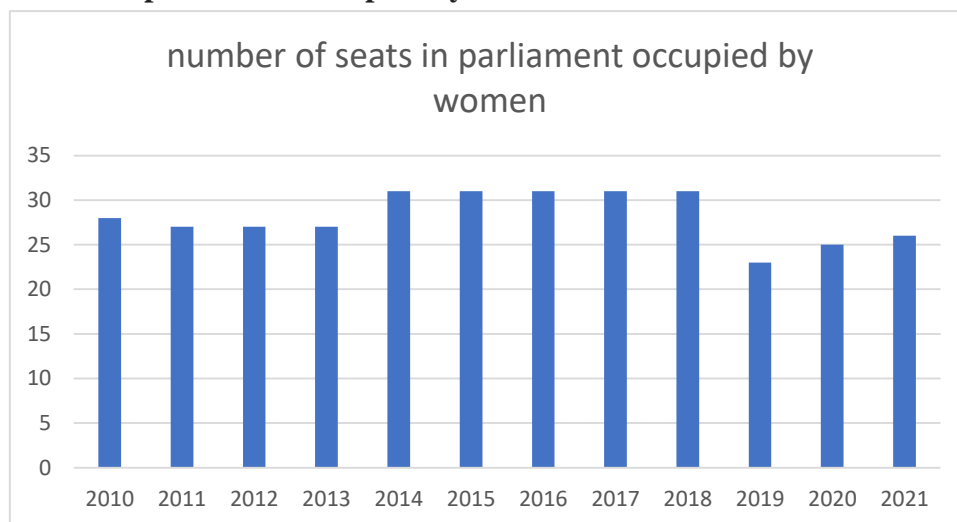
An important indicator with respect to gender equality, particularly relevant when considered in the light of the Women, Peace and Security agenda, is the participation of women in political life. While the revolution of 2011 has opened up various political spaces, at the same time women's participation in politics remains *de facto* constant, at least from a quantitative point of view. Restricting the analysis to the last decade, we can see that the number of seats occupied by women in the Tunisian parliament has not changed much, despite the introduction of new principles of equality with respect to women's participation in politics, in the last ten years.

This is evident when analysing, first of all, the legislation that characterised the electoral rounds in Tunisia from 2011 until 2018. Indeed, as reported by the NGO *Tadamon* (solidarity in Arabic), 'after the Arab Spring, Tunisia employed gender quotas for the 2011 National Constituent Assembly (NCA) elections, the 2014 parliamentary elections, and the 2018 municipal level elections, helping to ensure women's representation in legislative bodies at all levels of government'.⁴⁶

Tunisian electoral law requires (required) both vertical parity (i.e., alternating male and female candidates within each party list) and horizontal parity (which requires parties to present an equal number of lists headed by men and women in the various districts or municipalities).

This mechanism, which represented a step forward compared to the past, did not, however, contribute much to increasing the number of women elected to national institutions.

Chart 2 % of seats in parliament occupied by women from 2010 to 2021.



Source: World Bank data.

Taking a closer look at the different election rounds, just over 20% of the MPs elected in 2019 were in fact women. The general reason, according to the most recent polls conducted by the *Arab Barometer* in the same year (2019),⁴⁷ is the cautious involvement of women in political affairs: 52%

⁴⁶ Tadamon (2019). *Decentralisation and Women's Representation in Tunisia: The First Female Mayor of Tunis*. Tadamon. Available at the following link: <http://www.tadamun.co/decentralization-and-womens-representation-in-tunisia-the-first-female-mayor-of-tunis/?lang=en#.Y6MI5XbMK5>.

⁴⁷ *What Arabs Really Think About the Status of Women in Society*. (August 2019). Arab Barometer. Available at the following link: https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Arab-Barometer_Status-of-Women-in-MENA-Presentation_-Kuwait_Morocco_Jordan_2019.pdf.

of Tunisian women believe that men are better politicians than women, and only 21% declare themselves interested in the subject: in the 2019 legislative elections, only 36% of the eligible voters had in fact gone to the polls, compared to 64% recorded for their male counterparts.⁴⁸

The reason for this is to be found in the persistent, almost structural detachment between society and politics in the country. The strong separation of roles, whereby public life is the prerogative of men while the family burden generally falls on women, is a persistent element, especially in rural areas. Tunis remains a distant centre of power whose politics, especially for women, becomes an elitist affair disconnected from a reality perceived as incapable of systematically integrating women's needs and interests. And it is precisely because of the resolution of these issues that, on the contrary, women's interest in politics appears to be greater when looking at their participation in municipal elections. With reference to the 2018 local elections, 48% of voters were Tunisian women, without significant fluctuations between municipalities, compared to 52% male⁴⁹. Even at the level of representation, 47% of those elected in the municipalities were female deputies⁵⁰.

These indicators, although not exhaustive in providing a complete cross-section, reflect Tunisia's political journey since the 2011 revolution. As indicated below, the country's adoption of the 1325 National Action Plan was undoubtedly a significant step forward with respect to the promotion, at least in theory, of women's role in society and politics. However, there are still some structural criticalities that have not led, despite the advancement of *de jure* norms, to the desired results. In fact, even considering the legislative framework that has attempted to preserve and promote women's rights in the country, at least until 2018, serious structural deficiencies within the social and economic system hinder their effective achievement.

⁴⁸ La Presse (2019, 6 October). *Législatives : la majorité des femmes tunisiennes n'a pas été au rendez-vous*. Available at the following link: <https://lapresse.tn/27941/legislatives-la-majorite-des-femmes-tunisiennes-na-pas-ete-au-rendez-vous/>.

⁴⁹ ISIE - Instance Supérieure Indépendante pour les Élections. *Elections-municipales 2018: statistiques*. Available at the following link: <http://www.isie.tn/elections/elections-municipales-2018/statistiques/>.

⁵⁰ UNWomen. (2018, 27 August). *'Historic leap in Tunisia: Women make up 47 per cent of local government'*. Available at the following link: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/8/feature-tunisian-women-in-local-elections>.

3. *Lā salām dūn nisā'* (No peace without women): the Tunisian NAP⁵¹

The reception of the WPS Agenda in Tunisia was part of a broader process of strengthening gender policies in the national sphere. In fact, the Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security is only one of a number of developments in the areas of women empowerment, gender equality and anti-discrimination that have occurred in Tunisia in the post-2011 and up to 2018. We can here briefly recall the reform of the electoral law aimed at establishing vertical and horizontal parity in the lists of candidates of political parties; the establishment of the Council of Equal Opportunities between men and women; the ratification of the organic law on the elimination of all forms of violence against women; the creation of the Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee within the Presidency of the Republic; the development of the National Strategy for the Economic and Social Empowerment of Women and Girls in Rural Areas 2017-2020; the ratification of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human And Peoples' Rights on the rights of women in Africa; and the development of the 2016-2020 five-year national plan for the integration and institutionalisation of the gender approach. All these were natural prerequisites for the recognition of women's role in peace and stability in the country.

Although not experiencing a phase of 'live conflict', Tunisia has implemented the WPS Agenda with a view to ensuring peace and security during the democratic transition, aiming 'to adopt the gender approach at all levels to prevent risks', particularly related to radicalisation and violent extremism.

The Tunisian NAP is the result of a two-year participatory process involving several ministries and civil society associations, with technical and material support from the United Nations and the Republic of Finland. The input for the reception of the Agenda stems from an assessment conducted in 2017 by UN Women Morocco -financed by the Government of Finland- on the implementation of Resolution 1325 in Tunisia, which aimed to identify priorities to be included in the future National Action Plan.

The Tunisian NAP mainly focuses on "empowering women and girls; promoting their participation in building sustainable peace and stability; contributing to the elimination of all forms of gender-based discrimination and working to immunize society against the dangers of conflict, extremism and terrorism".

When drafting the plan, several ministries and governmental organisations were involved: Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Seniors; Presidency of the Council; Ministry of Justice; Ministry of National Defence; Ministry of the Interior; Ministry of Social Affairs; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Religious Affairs; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Education; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies; the Administrative Court; the National Counterterrorism Commission; and the Pole for Countering Terrorism and Organized Crime.

Some 15 institutions and organisations collaborated with these institutions and 10 civil society organisations with the aim of making the process of drafting and adopting the plan as inclusive as possible.

Preparatory work for the drafting of the Tunisian NAP began during a workshop held in May 2016 as part of the partnership between the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Seniors and UN Women, with the aim of informing and consulting the ministries involved in the preparation of the dossier and reaching out to these ministries to appoint their representatives to the steering

⁵¹ A version of the Tunisian NAP is available at <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/tunisia/>.

committee. In addition, a series of workshops⁵² were organised to improve the theoretical knowledge and practical skills on the topic of “women, peace and security” for members of the steering committee and technical committees with the aim of identifying the critical conditions of Tunisian women and providing a social cross-section that could facilitate intervention.

The plan is structured along **five basic axes** relating to: **1) prevention; 2) protection; 3) participation; 4) rescue, peacebuilding and reconstruction; 5) information and advocacy.**

THE TUNISIAN NAP	
AXES	OBJECTIVES
PREVENTION	Protecting women and girls from all forms of violence before, during and after conflicts, crises and natural disasters and under the threat of terrorism
PROTECTION	Ensuring the protection of women and girls from all forms and types of gender-based violence and discrimination in situations of conflict and terrorism, ensuring their physical, mental and psychological health and safety, the enjoyment of their human rights, facilitating the exercise of these rights and ensuring access to justice.
PARTICIPATION	Promoting the participation of Tunisian women and girls in political life, public affairs management and decision-making to maintain peace, resolve conflicts and tackle terrorism
RESCUE, PEACEBUILDING AND RECONSTRUCTION	High, effective and efficient participation of women and girls in peacekeeping, conflict resolution and counter-terrorism
INFORMATION AND ADVOCACY	Informing and raising awareness to obtain support and backing for the implementation of the plan

On the prevention side, NAP actions included, among others, the drafting of regional treaties combating gender-based violence, the establishment of a National Observatory for the prevention of violence against women and girls, the mainstreaming of the non-discrimination and gender equality approach in academia, research, education and culture, and the integration of NAP requirements into the national strategy against terrorism, violent extremism, discrimination and violence against women and girls.

With respect to the protection axis, the focus was on strengthening the economic and social empowerment of women, ensuring the systematic enforcement of laws against violence against women and girls, and developing a migration policy that would prevent women and girls from becoming victims of trafficking.

In the area of participation, the provisions included the enactment of measures and laws to take into account the principle of gender equality in all elected bodies, independent agencies and positions held at local and national level, procedures and temporary positive measures to adopt gender

⁵² The workshops covered, among others: determining the impact of conflicts on women and girls, Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions, the relationship between Resolution 1325 and international, regional and national charters and mechanisms on women’s rights, the general review of the Tunisian state’s obligations under international and regional instruments on women’s rights, determining how to protect women during armed conflicts, as well as refugee, migrant and displaced women.

equality in all political party structures and trade unions, support the capacity of women and girls for leadership, negotiation and conflict resolution at regional and local levels.

On rescue, peacebuilding and reconstruction, the NAP envisaged, among other things, facilitating the access of women and girls (especially victims of sexual violence) to justice, creating employment opportunities for women and girls, especially refugees and those with dependent families, and ensuring the availability of budgets for the economic and social empowerment of women and girls during the reconstruction phase.

With respect to the information and advocacy axis, specific to the Tunisian NAP, some of the actions defined included conducting studies on the social standards underpinning violence against women and girls, producing multimedia material to combat gender-based violence and violent extremism, educating women on their rights, and developing an information strategy for the 1325 national plan.

These axes turned out to be the basis for a joint inter-ministerial action to implement the WPS agenda aimed not only at curbing gender-based violence (on which important steps had already been taken, at least on paper, since the promulgation of law 58 of 2017), but also at making the gender issue ‘intersectional’. It is then important to highlight how, while the first four axes gather the standard lines of the Resolution, the fifth is a peculiarity of the Tunisian Plan. In fact, beyond the points set out in the UN Resolution, the Tunisian NAP has some ‘national’ features, as, moreover, do other states that have transposed Resolution 1325. Indeed, the NAP specifies that “the work of the plan for UN Resolution 1325 is characterised by particular political features within the different countries that have adopted it”.

In fact, the consultations for the drafting of the NAP began when Tunisia experienced major migratory flows of people fleeing Libya and a series of terrorist attacks with tragic budgets, including the Sousse attacks and the Bardo National Museum attack in Tunis. It should also not be forgotten that the country, in the same years, became one of the main ‘departure centres’ for foreign fighters enlisted in Syria with the Islamic State (ISIS or IS)⁵³.

It is therefore the geographical position of Tunisia, close to contexts such as Libya or sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the consequences arising from this - including growing radicalisation and the migration issue - that shape the declination of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Tunisia.

It is no coincidence that the NAP refers to some of the problems that have become acute in neighbouring countries since the so-called Arab Springs: radicalisation, conflict, migration and human trafficking. All of which, alongside national security, could also see women’s safety threatened. The axes of Prevention and Protection in particular, are already specific expertise of the government, which had laws especially aimed at protecting women, such as the one against gender-based violence.

3.1 The implementation of the NAP: between progress and critical issues

The implementation of the NAP begins in 2019, thanks to a structure that provided for the establishment of a Steering Committee (COPIL) composed of government representatives and chaired by the MAFFEPA, in charge of the implementation of the Plan. During the launch phase of the NAP, and thus during the first year of implementation, results were recorded in terms of training, institutional capacity-building in security and justice institutions, and gender mainstreaming in public policies. 14 ministries implemented respective Sectoral Plans (women, defence, interior, education, social affairs, religious affairs, health, agriculture, development, youth

⁵³ Quek, N. and Bin Othman Alkaff, S. H. (2019). Analysis of the Tunisian Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, vol. 11, no. 5, pp. 1-5. Available at the following link: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CTTA-May-2019.pdf>.

and sport, transport, cultural affairs, foreign affairs, justice), which were then merged into an overall implementation plan (Masterplan)⁵⁴.

If, as one interviewee points out, the very fact of having transposed Resolution 1325 resulted, at least at the institutional level, in greater “awareness of the importance of women in conflict resolution and in particular of the role of women, who should not be perceived as victims but as actors in the search for a solution”⁵⁵, the reception of the themes of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Tunisia was not immediate⁵⁶. For a country not in the throes of a live conflict, it was difficult, in fact, to understand that the Women, Peace and Security Resolution also concerned actors who are not at war. However, Resolution 1325 makes Tunisia’s case for a number of reasons. In addition to the threats to which it is exposed for geographical reasons, Tunisia is a country that, although it has embarked on a process of democratic transition, has nevertheless suffered latent political instability since post-2011. The drafting of the NAP was therefore consistent⁵⁷ with the national priorities of the moment, such as the fight against terrorism and violent extremism. In fact, in the aftermath of the fall of the decades-long dictator Ben Ali, the securitarian approach has been at the heart of government mandates, also impacting the declination of public policies.

That said, the implementation of the Action Plan presented some critical issues.

In terms of outreach to the general public, even considering the debates among some civil society organisations on Human Rights, Prevention of Violent Extremism and Resolution 1325⁵⁸, according to one of the interviewees during the mission to Tunis, “the NAP is largely unknown to the associations working on the ground”.⁵⁹

Despite the willingness to pursue an inclusive process, involving the different realities of civil society, the implementation of the plan suffered from - or failed to break free from - certain limitations that traditionally shape relations between institutions and civil society. According to one of the interviewees during the mission to Tunisia, the contribution of “rural women, women who live on the borders or in disadvantaged areas such as Gafsa and who are more exposed to risks”⁶⁰ was lacking. The actors who drafted the Plan are therefore not representative of the totality and plurality of Tunisian women. This aspect is not surprising, considering that the disparity in access to resources and more generally in access to information is part of the urban/rural dichotomy, typical of many countries in the region, and not only. As one of the interviewees points out: “Tunisia has a formidable and enviable legal arsenal, which places it first among Arab countries and also compared to some European countries. But social norms have not followed this evolution. Women living in coastal regions have imbued themselves with these legal innovations, but the same cannot be said for women in rural areas or in inland regions”.⁶¹ It is no coincidence that, according to the Report of the Observatory for the Defence of the Right to Difference⁶², the majority of gender-based discrimination cases reported between July 2020 and June 2022 are in the areas of Kef, Kasserine and Medenine. These critical issues, according to more than one actor active in the field, are not only the result of a traditionalist approach linked to religion, but of entrenched social norms.

⁵⁴ *Evaluation du processus d’élaboration et de mise en œuvre du PAN 1325, Plans sectoriels et Masterplan en Tunisie*, UN Women, April 2022.

⁵⁵ Interview with Tunisian CSO representative.

⁵⁶ Evaluation cit.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ UN Women, *Narrative Progress Report, WPS in the Arab States, Third Formal progress report to the Government of Finland* (January-December 2021).

⁵⁹ Interview with Tunisian CSO representative.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² The Observatory for the Defence of the Right to Difference was launched in 2018 by the Association for the Promotion of the Right to Difference (ADD) as a coordination space between different discriminated groups, public actors and civil society, which assumes a monitoring role to raise awareness of minority inequalities among the authorities and the public and to rethink and address the most obvious injustices by implementing structural reforms in the field of minority protection. *Data analysis report of discrimination cases collected by the O3DT, 2020-2022*.

If the activities organised by feminist associations in Tunis⁶³ are well attended, this is not the case in more peripheral areas. As reported by one of the interviewees, “at a recent demonstration in Kef against femicide, there were 40 women in the square”.⁶⁴ This reduced participation is mainly related to “the social pressure of being in a feminist association”⁶⁵ in certain areas. In a strongly patriarchal system, therefore, it is “necessary to engage in social dialogue”⁶⁶ in order to raise awareness about the role of women in decision-making processes and, more generally, about their emancipation. However, some associations have tried to broaden the geographical scope of the Agenda’s dissemination through their own activities. For example, one of the interviewees during the fieldwork in Tunisia stated that she had acted according to the mandate of her association, in the axis of “early warning on radicalisation and extremism” and had carried out “projects on how to detect signs of radicalisation and violent extremism in young people in two difficult neighbourhoods in the governorate of Bizerte, in Manouba and also in Ariana”.⁶⁷

A further critical issue concerns funding. While having as strengths the coherence with existing programmes and already established institutional capacities on some of the issues of Resolution 1325, in more general terms the NAP was found to remain a theoretical frame of reference, without a (clear) process of output allocation and budgeting, or at least a clear differentiation in resource allocation.

On the one hand, it has been complicated to establish which objectives have been achieved in terms of WPS, considering the parallelism between the NAP and actions already in place, which makes it difficult to attribute certain results to the NAP, as well as duplicating actions in some cases⁶⁸. In this regard, and more generally, major limitations can be attributed to the difficulty of measuring the structural changes that Resolution 1325 is supposed to bring about, such as, for example, its impact on gender equality. This problem is exacerbated in Tunisia by the difficulty of accessing data, often confidential, particularly relating to certain particularly ‘sensitive’ sectors such as security. The data, also reported by more than one interviewee for this project, is not only related to the specific implementation of the NAP, but embraces related spheres, such as Violence against Women.⁶⁹

On the other hand, it was difficult to cover financially all the activities that had been planned in only two years, as well as the personnel needed for the full implementation of the NAP⁷⁰. Insufficient resources therefore led some ministries to acrobatics to finance individual activities. As reported by one of the interviewees, this “Tunisian-style gymnastics”⁷¹ allowed “the Ministry of Women to use funds that it usually allocates to activities related to women’s empowerment (e.g., in favour of rural women) to cover NAP activities, including the fight against terrorism in risky territories”⁷² [...] and “Law 58 provided for the formation of specialised units to help women victims of violence, to be located in police stations, the formation of these units was done under the umbrella of the Action Plan, also conceptually integrating the objectives of Resolution 1325 with those provided for in Law 58-2017”.⁷³

Moreover, with the outbreak of the Pandemic, the NAP was not in line with emerging risks, such as Covid, as it did not provide any emergency response mechanism. The various ministries were not able to put most of their sectoral plans in place, as they had to concentrate their resources even in the emergency. Only two of the ministries, namely those of the Interior and Defence, implemented

⁶³ See for example the Tashweesh festival held in Tunis at the end of September 2022.

⁶⁴ Interview with an activist and expert on gender issues.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Interview with Tunisian CSO representative.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Evaluation cit.*

⁶⁹ Interview with an activist and expert on gender issues.

⁷⁰ Interview with UN Women representative, Tunis.

⁷¹ Interview with Tunisian CSO representative.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

almost all of the activities (around 98%) related to the WPS agenda, especially in terms of increasing the number of women in the workforce, including in decision-making positions⁷⁴.

Finally, as a general consideration, it is worth mentioning here that the NAP has mainly focused on the Prevention and Protection axes, less on the ‘participation’ axis, understood in its declination of economic empowerment. Among the main achievements in terms of implementation of the Agenda are in fact training initiatives, conducted by UN Women, for Special Security Units on how to deal more efficiently with victims of violence and training to some representatives of national and local services for survivors of gender-based violence on improving the quality of care.⁷⁵ Very important initiatives that however seem to suffer, in addition to the leading role played by the Ministries of Interior and Defence in the implementation of the NAP, from a paternalistic vision that lingers in considering women as ‘victims’ to be protected and is instead less attentive to strengthening their agency through the implementation of political and economic empowerment interventions.

On the basis of the results achieved and the difficulties faced, however, a re-launch of the agenda is now underway for the implementation of the second NAP.

UN Women is offering technical assistance to the different COPIL members so that the various ministries adopt a WPS agenda adapted to the changed economic and social context, aligning it with current priorities. In addition, in order to broaden the range of actors involved in the dissemination and implementation of the NAP, a call for participation was launched in August 2022 for civil society associations to form the new committee that will accompany COPIL in the development of the second plan. Eleven associations were selected respecting certain thematic criteria (associations working on one of the WPS axes, on climate change and on the protection and participation of young people and children) and geographical distribution⁷⁶, although some associations interviewed during the field mission claimed not to have been asked or not to have participated due to the changed political context.

UN Women’s work on Women, Peace and Security is supported by the Finnish Government, which has made women’s participation in society a key plank of its work in the Middle East and North Africa region. The Government of Finland’s programmes include the second phase of Women, Peace and Security in the Arab States, which aims to strengthen the countries’ capacity to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and improve the position of women and girls in conflict situations.⁷⁷ Programme support for 2019-2021 already amounted to EUR 4.7 million.⁷⁸ For the period 2021-2024, next to activities related to climate change mitigation, Finland’s development cooperation strategy in the area aims at supporting Goals 5 (gender equality), 8 (decent work and economic growth) and 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) of the 2030 Agenda for a total of EUR 11.6 million⁷⁹. Finland’s efforts to support the promotion of the WPS Agenda in Tunisia includes funding for the assessment of the progress of the Tunisian NAP, to identify critical issues and developments in order to prepare the new phase.⁸⁰

A new phase of the Plan will inevitably come up against a series of difficulties that have accompanied Tunisia in recent years. The consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, as well as a series of upheavals at the political-institutional level, have exacerbated an already latent internal crisis that seems to have overshadowed the promotion of the Agenda. Ministerial budgets have been directed towards other emergencies and few human resources have been invested in communicating the Agenda’s themes, which are linked to the macro-objective of

⁷⁴ Interview with UN Women representative, Tunis.

⁷⁵ UN Women, *Narrative Progress Report, WPS in the Arab States, Third Formal progress report to the Government of Finland* (January-December 2021).

⁷⁶ Interview with UN Women representative, Tunis.

⁷⁷ Cfr. <https://finlandabroad.fi/web/tun/finland-s-development-cooperation-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ See: <https://finlandabroad.fi/web/tun/finland-s-development-cooperation-in-the-middle-east-and-northafrica>.

⁸⁰ Reference is to the *Evaluation du processus d’elaboration et de mise en oeuvre du PAN 1325, Plans sectoriels et Masterplan en Tunisie*, UN WOMEN, April 2022.

empowering women and girls, promoting their participation in achieving lasting peace and stability, eliminating all forms of gender discrimination, and ensuring the protection of society against the risks of conflict, extremism and terrorism. The securitarian approach to women as well, while necessary, has prevailed over the capacity-building approach.

In addition, at present there remains the problem of the instability of the political-governmental set-up, which also translates into criticalities from the point of view of the implementation of the Agenda at the national level. On the one hand, the governmental turnover in recent years has made - and still makes- difficult the continuity in the training of ministerial staff on Women, Peace and Security and its transformation into consolidated institutional knowledge. On the other hand, as pointed out by one of the interviewees during the research mission to Tunisia: “political instability” in a climate of economic and social uncertainty “favours patriarchy”⁸¹ and the current political set-up raises doubts about the future of the country’s democratic transition process and, consequently, the consolidation of women’s rights. As reported by one of the interviewees, today more than ever it is necessary to use instruments aimed at the defence and protection of the most vulnerable groups because “the internal (economic and social) situation exposes women to great risks”.⁸²

3.2 Gender equality to the test of Kais Saied

The October 2019 presidential elections saw the triumph of independent candidate Kais Saied. In the formation of the parliamentary assembly, the representation of women declined in comparison with the 2014 elections: only 49 female MPs for 217 seats, or 22.5% of the total. Subsequently, the 2020 pandemic crisis triggered a series of economic, political and social repercussions: although contagions were contained during the first months, the impact of the global pandemic also reverberated on the Tunisian economy. At the end of that year, GDP contracted by 8.2%, the highest since independence⁸³. The deadliest pandemic wave was recorded in the period between July and August 2021, with a peak of more than 300 deaths in one day. Attempts by the government to counter the crisis revealed deep fractures in the parliamentary ranks, which spilled over into the relations between parliament, the government and the presidency. The political stalemate created by the absence of dialogue between the institutions, the worsening health crisis and the increasing violence of social mobilisation led President Saied, on 25 July 2021, to dismiss the prime minister and divest the ARP, ushering in a period of legislation by decree-law. In light of subsequent developments, the authoritarian turn represented the beginning of a new phase for contemporary Tunisia, ultimately realised through the abrogation of the 2014 Constitution and the promulgation of a new constitutional text, which officially came into force on 16 August 2022.

Among the first major steps after 25 July, the appointment of Najla Bouden Romdhane as head of the executive in September 2021 has had international resonance. On the one hand, while it is true that Bouden represents the Arab world’s first female premier, it is also true that such an appointment has been described as a strategic move with the aim of rehabilitating the figure of the president in the eyes of the international community, as well as an act of *pinkwashing* that recalls the assumptions of state feminism. The feminist association *Aswat Nissa* (2021)⁸⁴, which is very active in the field of information and communication, explains that this is irrefutably a *pro forma* empowerment: by virtue of Decree-Law 117 of 2021, executive power is transferred to the figure of the president of the republic, thus emptying the prime minister of his/her role. This is also

⁸¹ Interview with an activist and expert on gender issues.

⁸² Interview with Tunisian CSO representative

⁸³ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2021). “*The Tunisian Debt Crisis in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic; Debt Repayments over Human Rights?*”. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/tunesien/18186-20210910.pdf>.

⁸⁴ *Aswat Nissa* is a Tunisian feminist non-governmental organisation established in 2011. The organisation is non-partisan and free from political influence. It advocates for the integration of the gender approach in all public policies. In Arabic, *Aswat Nissa* means ‘the Voices of Women’. They have distinguished themselves in a series of detailed analyses of public discourse on gender issues and have participated in various gender-related initiatives. See: <https://www.aswatnissa.org/en/about-us/>.

reaffirmed in the new constitutional text (Art. 87), which therefore strengthens the position of the president over that of the government.

In a work of foresight, the socio-economic situation, tragically precipitated by the exponential increase in inflation, could worsen the sense of apathy towards institutional apparatuses, even considering the turbulent constitutional changes of recent months. Recent data foreshadow this: as reported by the feminist association *Beity* (2022)⁸⁵, the electronic consultations on constitutional reforms held from January to March 2022 saw women's participation stagnate at 31.53%.

On the women's rights front, the issue of inheritance, frozen under Essebsi's presidency, has not yet been formally taken up by Saied, who seems to frame it in the opposition between bourgeois feminism and popular reality. In a speech on 13 August 2020, on the occasion of Women's Day in Tunisia, the president had clarified the need to establish socio-economic equality between the sexes before addressing the issue of inheritance and that, in fact, the precision of the provisions contained in the Koran on this matter leaves no room for interpretation for a reform of inheritance law in favour of women. *Aswat Nissa* (2021)⁸⁶ considers Saied's positions dangerous, not only because of their content, but also because he assumes a binary division of the world of women, dividing it into two categories, the privileged and the non-privileged: this with the aim of fragmenting and weakening the Tunisian feminist movement, reducing its vigour. Moreover, the new constitutional text threatens certain achievements in the field of women's rights when compared to the 2014 Constitution. For example, Article 5 emphasises that Tunisia belongs to the Muslim community and that the state, as such, has a duty to realise the purposes of Islam. The form of the article is generic and ambiguous, making it susceptible to interpretations that could threaten the socially and civilly acquired freedoms of women⁸⁷. In fact, civil society was only marginally involved in the process of revising the Constitution, so much so that *Aswat Nissa* calls it a *one-sided* product (2022). Moreover, no article opens up women's participation in the political or civil sphere, contrary to the 2014 Constitution, which explicitly signalled the need for the state to foster and promote gender equality, including in representative assemblies at all levels (Art. 46).

Actually, President Saied's staunch opposition to the inheritance law, as well as the new constitution, which shows clear signs of conservatism, portend that women's rights are not a priority of the new power, especially at the social level⁸⁸.

ATFD, AFTURD, *Aswat Nissa*, *Beity* remain at the centre of feminist mobilisation, and they are, for example, the reference associations of *Dynamique Féministe*, a network of eight groups opposing the formal and informal restrictions placed on gender equality in the new political system. In addition to remaining a source of countless studies carried out with the support of international organisations, these associations actively oppose constitutional changes through awareness-raising campaigns. This is also confirmed by the various interviews carried out during the mission to Tunisia, especially by actors linked to associations active in the implementation of the Tunisian NAP. Several interviewees pointed out that the new electoral law goes in the opposite direction to the achievements of the revolution. More specifically, according to one of the interviewees: "The new law no longer speaks of women, it only uses them instrumentally when it says that the 400 signatures needed to submit a candidature must be half women, as if to say, 'here are the women, you see?' But in truth only to support the candidature of men. The same can be said for the

⁸⁵ *Beity* (April, 2022). *Mémoire Etat D'exception Et Droits Des Femmes : Défis Et Perspectives*. Available at the following link: https://beity-tunisie.org/?page_id=10746.

⁸⁶ *Aswat Nissa*, (2021), '*Kais Saied Gender Meter*'. Available at: https://www.aswatnissa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Web_Brochure_RapportComplet_21cmX25cm_Kais-Saied_GenderMeter-1.pdf.

⁸⁷ *Aswat Nissa* (2022), '*Kais Saied Constitutional Project: a Threat to Women's Rights and Individual Freedoms*'. Available at: <https://www.aswatnissa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/document-Aswat-Nissa-EN-3.pdf>.

⁸⁸ Ben Azouz, K. (2022, 1 September). '*President Saied Derides the Economic and Social Rights of Tunisian Women*'. *Nawaat*, Available at the following link: <https://nawaat.org/2022/09/01/president-saied-derides-the-economic-and-social-rights-of-tunisian-women/>.

participation of young people’’.⁸⁹ In fact, in the run-up to the legislative elections scheduled for 17 December 2022, only 14% of the candidates are women⁹⁰.

Table 2. Comparison of electoral law of 2014 and 2022 on gender issues⁹¹.

Electoral Law 2014	Electoral Law 2022	Main effects
It established gender quality and youth quota in candidate lists. In all districts with an even number of seats, each block or party must nominate an equal number of women and men. In districts with four or more seats, each bloc or party must have at least one candidate not older than 35. If a bloc or party does not meet the youth quota, it loses half of the public funding for its campaigns.	Deletion of the clauses on gender equality and youth quotas in the lists of block candidates (now obsolete).	In line with the general abolition of candidate lists. It also contributes to weakening the power of parties and blocs and eliminates support for the inclusion of underrepresented groups in the electoral process (including women)

Source: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Alongside this is the issue of the repression of spaces of dissent, which does not only touch on the demands for women’s rights. Having spoken out against Decree 88 of 2011 regulating freedom of association, in February 2022 President Saïed pronounced his intention to revise the contours of foreign funding for associations, which he described as a means of foreign interference, with the risk of compromising freedom of expression and association.

Against this backdrop and in a multidimensional analysis of the state of the art of feminist mobilisation, however, it is important to emphasise how, in Tunisia, women’s associationism remains plural and intersectional. Alongside the consolidated associations operating at the national and regional levels, there are local associations (such as, for example, *Voix d’Eve* in the Sidi Bouzid area, *Association Femme et Citoyenneté* in El-Kef and *Nakhwa* in the province of Gabès) that manage to consolidate through mobilisation in public spaces, and initiatives such as *Anbar - Voix des femmes noires Tunisiennes* (a collective set up in 2020) that open up to more specific issues.

In conclusion, the question remains whether, in a political reality that has changed since the post-revolutionary years and is veering towards a more authoritarian than democratic practice, the different associations fighting for the different declinations of gender rights will find, on the one hand, the way and the strength to dialogue with each other and, on the other hand a collaborative shore in the political forces present in the country today, in order to maintain a strong focus on gender issues by bringing the fight for women’s emancipation, also a key pillar of Resolution 1325, back to the centre, in one of the countries that symbolised the 2011 mobilisations.

⁸⁹ Interview with Tunsian CSO representative.

⁹⁰ See: <https://lapresse.tn/143061/nouvelle-loi-electorale-le-legislateur-sera-majoritairement-masculin/>.

⁹¹ See the election work of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/11/tunisia-s-new-electoral-law-is-another-blow-to-its-democratic-progress-pub-88127>.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Eleven years after the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ that put an end to the more than ten-year regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia has embarked on a phase of transition to democracy, including, in the process, a number of milestones in terms of the country’s reception of its formal human rights obligations, and more specifically, those concerning women.

Since the 2014 Constitution, there has been a progressive process of institutionalising women’s rights in Tunisia. The reform of the electoral law that was aimed at establishing vertical and horizontal equality in the lists of candidates of political parties; the establishment of the Council of Equal Opportunities between men and women; the ratification of the organic law on the elimination of all forms of violence against women; the creation of the Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee within the Presidency of the Republic; the development of the National Strategy for the Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls in Rural Areas 2017-2020; the ratification of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa; and the development of the 2016-2020 five-year national plan for the integration and institutionalisation of the gender approach, are just some of the measures that had translated the institutional will to increase the space of gender issues, at the decision-making and governmental level, at least until 2019. Corroborating this framework was the adoption of the National Action Plan on UN Resolution 1325 for the recognition of women’s role in peace and stability in the country.

However, without prejudice to these evolutions and developments, the analysis of the reception of the WPS agenda and its implementation opens up considerations with respect to the path of gender rights in Tunisia, channelled into the dichotomy of ‘institutionalisation - impact’.

On the one hand, rights have served as a means of legitimising national power in the eyes of the international community, and the state’s appropriation of these issues has limited the development of an autonomous feminist movement as well as its impact on decision-making processes.

On the other hand, this process has nevertheless allowed important foundations to be laid towards gender equality. As one of the interviewees pointed out, “it is true that the gender issue has always been instrumentalised in Tunisia, but this has allowed it to be debated and to move forward on these issues”.⁹²

After 2011, when women participated in and formed an integral part of the street demands, a greater institutional willingness to adhere to international standards on human rights, and in particular on gender issues, was registered in the country, in the name of a plural process.

As the adoption of NAP 1325 reveals, however, the implementation of the laws born out of this inclusive spirit has been beset with obstacles, not least because of structural problems in Tunisian politics and society, only exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis linked to the war in Ukraine.

Faced with a governmental *impasse* that did not allow the launch of effective reforms in a climate of deep economic and political crisis, President Kais Saied deprived Parliament of its power on 25 July 2021, paving the way for a hyper-presidentialist turn.

In a country where the embryonic democratisation process had laid the foundations for change in terms of civil rights, this change, which also included the adoption of a new constitution and a new electoral law, raises serious doubts about both the future of the democratic transition process and the consolidation of women’s rights.

⁹² Interview with an ex member of the Tunisian parliament

In this regard and given Tunisia's centrality in relation to its Mediterranean partner countries, particularly Italy, an action aimed at recovering the centrality of the promotion of the role of women in the democratic transition process is, as of today, extremely important. Through the action of cooperation and the historical bilateral relations that continue, despite the great questions and important reservations posed by the drastic change of course following 25 July, it is more necessary than ever to adopt an inclusive approach that goes from the institutions to civil society by promoting the dissemination and implementation of the main themes of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. Below are some proposals for Italy in this direction.

Promoting the dissemination of the Women, Peace and Security agenda

The Tunisian NAP was characterised by the addition to the four basic axes of the WPS Agenda of a fifth element relating to communication to promote the Agenda. However, many civil society organisations themselves are unaware of the NAP, and even among those who are aware of it, because they were directly involved in its design and implementation, perplexity remains about the state of play.

Considering the importance of Tunisia's stability for Italy and the role that greater involvement of women in decision-making areas has for the peace and security of each country, it is necessary to encourage greater dissemination of the Agenda at the national level.

The use of social media can be a means to foster communication. It is no coincidence that the largest mobilisations of women in the country have gathered through intensive blogging by activists, movements and civil society organisations. *Ena Zeda* (the Tunisian counterpart of the *MeToo movement*) is one example.

A step towards the dissemination of 'Women, Peace and Security' could be to promote awareness-raising campaigns on the Agenda's themes by favouring training through the organisation of *ad hoc* courses on communication and content creation to various civil society associations engaged in the promotion of women's rights, considering the criterion of geographical distribution, in order to favour the use of a language that can be understood by all members of society.

Strengthening training activities and exchange between countries by promoting consultations and exchanges of good practices, especially in the area of Women, Peace and Security

Exchange, as well as training, are in fact two cornerstones in terms of cooperation between countries, especially in the area of women's rights, which, even when acquired, risk being downgraded in practice. While at the international level, the Agenda aims to universalise certain fundamental rights, it is precisely cooperation that should help develop mechanisms that initiate processes to *localise* fundamental objectives. Tunisia, like any country on the globe, has social, traditional, cultural and political peculiarities that cannot be overlooked and that also influence the translation of legislative provisions into *de facto* reality.

It is therefore necessary to foster the exchange of good practices, especially in terms of implementing the Agenda, both intra-regional and international, guaranteeing the possibility of actions aimed at capacity-building, especially with regard to overcoming critical issues related to the development of projects and actions in terms of Women, Peace and Security, also through the exchange of assessments between Italy and Tunisia on the implementation of their respective Action Plans.

Encouraging networking actions between the different women's (and men's) associations on the ground

Over the years, especially after 2014, Tunisia has equipped itself with a legal arsenal at the forefront of women's rights. However, especially with the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic crisis caused by

the war in Ukraine, and the post-25 July political set-up, there has been a setback in terms of gender-based violence, women's political inclusion, and the narrative on gender issues, which are often linked to an elitist concept.

In a climate of internal crisis, both economic and social and political, it is necessary to foster the promotion of a dialogue at the national level, including women from different social, economic, cultural, political and religious backgrounds, not only on the issue of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda but more generally on the promotion of women's role in society and their rights.

To support the concept of women as drivers of change, Italy needs to support the development of training programmes, networking and advocacy initiatives that enable women to support and inspire each other. Considering the substantial differences between women in Tunis and women living in more peripheral or rural areas and where patriarchal structures are more entrenched, dialogue and awareness-raising on the issues of gender-based violence, economic empowerment and women's political participation in society, can serve to agree on a common perimeter to fight for, because "when it comes to women's rights, we all have to say the same thing"⁹³.

It is also necessary to include men in the training and exchanges, so that the deconstruction of the narrative that sees women relegated to secondary roles within society is not just a discourse addressed to a female audience and is, therefore, more supported and sustainable.

Mobilising funds and channelling them to civil society

The inclusion of civil society organisations and associations, as demonstrated by the window that has opened since 2011, is a necessary condition for fostering the country's openness to international agendas that could, in turn, play a central role, not only in the achievement of the objectives set, but also for a general advancement of democratic mechanisms.

The problem of financing the Agenda and the budget dedicated to it by the Tunisian institutions involved was one of the most critical issues in terms of implementation. In terms of development cooperation, especially at the level of European countries, funds should be mobilised with well-defined constraints. Considering that Tunisian law with respect to foreign funding for civil society is very restrictive and seeks to limit it for fear of illicit funding to organisations that could threaten the 'stability of the country', focusing on content such as women's rights and their importance for peace and security in the country could be a way to open channels for dialogue.

In this sense, greater collaboration between Italy and Tunisia to facilitate funding channels for civil society to promote activities related to the implementation of the Agenda is highly desirable. As the backbone of the Tunisian NAP, economic empowerment is one of the aspects to focus on. In this sense, it is important to continue strengthening the capillary presence of Italian cooperation in rural areas, promoting processes of economic inclusion of the most vulnerable women such as migrant women, especially in border areas. Women who are usually excluded from the decision-making process but who are the main and potential victims of violence, violent extremism and discrimination.

Promoting exchanges between Italy and Tunisia in the field of education and training

If economic empowerment is a fundamental condition for ensuring women's independence and enhancing their role in all areas of decision-making, the level of education and the possibility to travel and engage with the outside world compete in parallel.

Cooperation actions should be aimed at encouraging exchanges between the academies of our countries, in order to foster the dissemination of different points of view and experiences and the acquisition of new skills among young Tunisian and Italian women and men.

⁹³ Interview with Tunisian CSO representative .

Incentivising linguistic exchange between the two countries by increasing the number of scholarships available to Tunisia for the study of the Italian language in Italy could also represent an important step in terms of cultural cooperation but also of mutual knowledge, favouring the opening of further channels of dialogue between the two countries. Alongside this, training initiatives for young women could be supported, such as the provision of traineeships to Italy, aimed at strengthening cooperation between the territories but also at facilitating the exchange and acquisition of reciprocal skills that are also potentially useful to the needs of the many Italian businesses operating in Tunisia.

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3.3. 3.3. List of interviews

- ADD (Association for the Promotion of the Right to Difference).
- AFTURD (Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development).
- ANOLF Piedmont Focal Point.
- Expert in migration and gender issues.
- Finnish Embassy, Mission in Tunisia.
- UN Women, Tunis Office
- Former trade unionist and among the founders of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD)
- AICS Tunis
- Expert in gender-based violence
- Former member of the Tunisian parliament
- Journalist, specialist in social movements and new forms of civil resistance

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