Women and Employment in Tunisia

Structures, Institutions, and Advocacy

ABSTRACT Tunisia’s legacy of “state feminism” and its strong civil society—including human rights, labor, and women’s rights organizations—have placed Tunisian women in advance of their Arab sisters, and women are present across an array of professions and occupations. Still, most Tunisian women remain outside the labor force, face precarious forms of employment, or are unemployed. This article examines women’s employment patterns, problems, and prospects in the light of an untoward economic environment, conservative social norms, and feminist advocacy. Drawing on interview and documentary data, and informed by feminist political economy and institutionalism, it highlights the importance of institutional supports for working mothers and improved work conditions to encourage more female economic participation and stronger labor-force attachment and thus to weaken patriarchal attitudes and values. The paper points to the need for both class-based and gender-based policies with respect to women’s economic participation and rights. KEYWORDS women, labor force, state feminism, feminist advocacy, development, political economy, institutions

INTRODUCTION Tunisia’s secular republican polity and multiparty system provide a favorable legal context for women’s empowerment, and when compared with other Arab countries, Tunisia boasts a more women-friendly normative environment. Successive governments have presented themselves as the champion of women’s rights. The country has several visible and vocal women’s rights organizations and women’s policy agencies that conduct research and advocacy on women’s participation and rights. As studies have shown (Ben Salem 2010; Charrad 2001; Charrad and Zarrugh 2014; CREDF 2013b; Khalili 2014; Moghadam 2016; Tchaicha and Arfaoui 2017), women’s progress in the early decades of post-independence Tunisia was generated in part by the state’s favorable stance toward women’s participation and rights, most notably in the form of the enlightened Code du Statut Personnel (CSP) of 1956, and by a welfarist and developmentalist stance (Ben Romdhane 2006). In more recent years, women’s rights associations held public protests and worked in coalition with secular and left-wing political parties to help win the debates within the National Constituent Assembly in 2012 and 2013 to produce a constitution, adopted in January 2014, with the now-famous Article 46:

The state commits to protect women’s accrued rights and work to strengthen and develop those rights. The state guarantees the equality of opportunities between women and men to have access to all levels of responsibility in all domains. The state works to attain parity.
between women and men in elected Assemblies. The state shall take all necessary measures in order to eradicate violence against women.

The constitution also stipulates political parity, with the result that Tunisia in late 2017 was among the 47 countries in the world with at least 30% female parliamentary representation. Tunisia is in many respects a unique case in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), especially in terms of women’s advanced civil and political rights, the country’s democratic institutions, and the strength of Tunisia’s civil society. On the eve of the Arab Spring, for example, Tunisian women were ahead of other North African countries (Table 1).

Tunisian women have a labor-force participation (FLFP) rate only half that of developed OECD countries but higher than most Arab countries. Whereas in 1980 Tunisian women accounted for just 15% of all employees, the proportion rose to 28.6% in 2014 (République Tunisienne 2014:14). Many women work as lawyers and judges: 28% of lawyers are women, while in 2010 nearly half the constitutional judges were women (OECD 2014). On the eve of the revolution, women made up 39% of the staff in the civil service (Ben Salem 2010:501). In the health field, 42% of doctors, 72% of pharmacists, 57% of dental surgeons, and 42% of university teaching staff were women. The majority of university students were female. Moreover, according to Samia Charfi Kaddour, professor of physics at the University of Tunis, El Manal, “There are more and more women in decision-making positions, in

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<th>TABLE 1. Social/gender indicators at the start of Arab Spring (2010–11), Tunisia and Maghreb</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Parameter</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Paid labor force, F %</td>
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<td>Tertiary enrolment, F % age group</td>
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<td>Mean age at first marriage, F</td>
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<td>Total fertility rate</td>
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<td>Female share, seats in parliament (1995–2010)</td>
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<td>Female share of university teaching staff</td>
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<td>State of women’s movement</td>
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Sources: World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report, various years; Sonneveld and Lindbæk (2017).
charge of laboratories or research. At the Ministry of Higher Education, there are nearly as many women (40%) as men (60%) in posts of director-general.” These figures and realities suggest the extent to which public and private services depend on women, and they have placed Tunisia at the top of the region in terms of the UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index; at 46, Tunisia ranked just below the much richer United Arab Emirates (40) but much higher than other MENA countries (UNDP 2013: Table 4, 156–57).

Despite the positive features, however, aspects of the country’s institutional frameworks keep women from progressing in the workforce. The Labor Law differentiates between the public and private sectors, disadvantaging many low-income and working-class women. In the public sector, social insurance is provided, and women are entitled to two months’ paid maternity leave and on-site child care facilities at workplaces with more than 50 workers (Ben Salem 2010:502). For the private sector, the law stipulates a leave of 30 days and a year-long right of new mothers to leave work daily to breastfeed, but the law is not enforced, and small enterprises are exempt. There is no gender distinction in social security provisions, but the mandatory requirements apply to civil servants only (Bernard-Maugiron 2015:8). Unsurprisingly, many employed women find it difficult to balance work and family life (Ben Salem 2010:501). Work contracts no longer guarantee long-term, stable employment (CREDIF 2015:47). Private universities rely mostly on temporary rather than permanent teaching staff (Boughzala, Ghazouani, and Ben Hafaiedh 2016:17).

The female unemployment rate (22%) is twice that of males, and concentrated among young university-educated women. The problem of female unemployment predates the post-revolutionary economic difficulties, but it worsened when investments sharply declined in most sectors following the revolutionary upheaval and several terrorist attacks. Foreign direct investment (FDI) flows decreased by 29% in 2011, and 182 foreign firms—Italian, French, and German—closed, with the loss of 10,930 jobs (Ayadi and Mattoussi 2014:6). The decline of FDI was also severe in the tourism sector. The highest female unemployment rates are found in the country’s interior, reaching 40–46% in Kebili, Gafsa, and Tataouine—rates that are two to three times higher than men’s (République Tunisienne 2014:16; see also République Tunisienne 2012). Tunisia’s interior lacks the infrastructure, transformational knowledge, and information networks that the northeast and the coastal areas enjoy, and healthcare needs are largely unmet in low-income areas such as Jendouba, Le Kef, Kasserine, and Gafsa, where 60% of women suffer from health problems and just 10% have access to healthcare (Elrahi 2015).

What explains these limitations of women’s economic empowerment in Tunisia? Could general unemployment, precarious employment conditions in the private sector, and the absence of supports for maternal employment be limiting female employment? What is being done to mitigate the impediments and risks to women’s continued progress?

Theoretical Approach and Sources of Data

This article is rooted in the sociology of development, which combines “the social, political, and cultural forces that make up a society” in its analyses (Cohn and Hooks 2016:5) and is part of the interdisciplinary tradition of feminist development studies. Specifically, it is informed by feminist political economy and feminist institutionalism, which apply a gender
lens to macroeconomic environment, development planning and state policies to assess their effects on women’s inclusion, equality, and economic and political empowerment. Analyzing global transformations in women’s work and highlighting the contributions of women’s care work, the framework posits that deeply ingrained gender norms and relations interact with political-economic practices and distributional outcomes (Gottfried 2013). Feminist scholars have uncovered male bias in development planning and projects (Elson 1991), the effects of structural adjustment policies on women’s productive and reproductive burdens (Beneria and Feldman 1992), the impact of privatization and liberalization on women’s work opportunities (Moghadam, Franzway, and Fonow 2011), and the effects of crisis and austerity measures (Bargawi, Cozzi, and Himmelweit 2016; Rubery 2015; Walby 2015). Feminist economists have addressed institutional deficits and gender bias in social-care provisioning, showing that expansion of such provisioning is a source of productive employment and growth (Ilkkaracan, Kim, and Kaya 2015). Feminist institutionalists interrogate laws, policies, and political institutions for gender biases, revealing how such structures reinforce and normalize gender norms and power relations (Rai and Waylen 2014). Norms and institutions, whether formal or informal, can block change, including progress toward gender equality (Waylen 2017). The influence of such norms and institutions, however, may have varied effects on different categories of women. Upper-middle-class educated women have more options and opportunities than do working-class women and those from low-income households. As Htun and Weldon (2010) have noted, both class-based and gender-based perspectives are needed in analyses of women’s empowerment.

The wider feminist scholarship on political economy and institutions has its parallels in MENA scholarship. Studies have shown how both formal and informal institutions—conservative social norms, family laws that place women in a subordinate position vis-à-vis male kin or spouses, and weak or nonexistent domestic violence legislation—affect women’s overall status, gender relations, and economic participation (Joseph 2000; Moghadam 2006; Welchman 2004). Studies have also covered the effects of liberalization, privatization, and the neoliberal turn on women’s employment (Cagatay and Berik 1990; Hatem 1994; Karshenas 2001). They have drawn attention to the low levels of female labor-force participation and employment, the weak labor-force attachment of married women, the preference for public-sector jobs, and women’s high unemployment rates (Assaad et al. 2016; Assaad et al. 2017; Ilkkaracan 2012; Karshenas, Moghadam, and Chamlou 2016; Nazier and Ramadan 2018). These problems appear to adversely affect women from lower-income, working-class, or conservative households. They also are present in Tunisia, despite its legacy of state feminism, its larger female labor force, and its influential feminist organizations.

As a contribution to such studies, this article examines women’s employment problems in an overall untoward economic and governance environment. In drawing attention to the gap between women’s civil and political participation and rights on the one hand, and women’s socioeconomic participation and rights on the other, a gap that has widened since the adoption of neoliberal policies in the latter part of the 1990s and into the new century, it highlights the need for both class-based and gender-based policies and institutions. My interview and documentary data also reveal the role of women’s rights organizations, policy agencies, and individual feminists in researching and advocating improved working
conditions. Through its detailed case study of a relatively under-researched part of the world-system, the article also contributes to the sociology-of-development literature.

The article is based on three research projects recently concluded, wherein I conducted interviews with an array of Tunisian women and men, acquired publications of feminist organizations, examined survey data, and consulted official documents and reports. Between 2013 and 2017 I visited Tunisia each year—usually in March or May/June—and carried out interviews with a total of six professors, four legal scholars, an enterprise owner, two policy-agency directors, a young teacher, two members of parliament, two former government officials, three feminist trade unionists, and 12 young graduates. Some of my contacts were interviewed each year. I also communicated with my contacts in Tunisia by email and in 2017 joined a Facebook group initiated by Tunisian feminists. The interviews and postings revealed hope and frustration alike, along with clarification of political, economic, and social developments in Tunisia in general and with respect to women’s conditions in particular. For information and data on the economic environment, I rely largely on studies by Tunisian economists, government sources, and publications of the women’s organizations and policy agencies.

The next section provides an overview of the evolution of Tunisian women’s socio-economic participation and conditions and Tunisia’s women’s rights movements and institutions. The section after that delves into the interview data, giving voice to the perspectives of women’s rights advocates. The final section summarizes the key issues and findings with respect to gender and class in a democratizing society within a global neoliberal economy.

WOMEN, WORK, AND STATE POLICIES
Why does attention to women and work matter? Feminist scholars have long argued that women’s economic participation and income control—and especially access to remunerative work in the formal sector of the economy—is key to women’s equality and empowerment. Employment and income-earning give women voice, agency, and resources to make decisions in the household and community, avoid domestic violence or leave an abusive domicile, join associations, unions, and political parties, and run for office. Employed women tend to have greater control over decision-making within the family; households also benefit when women control income and spending, and the well-being of children is linked to female education and income (Blumberg 2016; Chafetz 1990; ILO 2012; Kabeer 1999; Moghadam 1998, 2003; World Bank 2012, 2014). Employment alone does not emancipate women, especially if jobs do not pull women and their households out of poverty or provide what the International Labour Organization (ILO) calls “decent work,” which includes the enjoyment of work–family balance. Over the years, there has been much criticism of the kinds of work available to women, especially since privatization, liberalization, and flexibilization were adopted as the policy framework in the 1980s. Neoliberal capitalist globalization may have increased trade across the world economy, encouraged FDI, and generated job growth, but it also has favored large corporations over small businesses and labor, with the result that jobs have been lost when state-owned enterprises were privatized or factories shut down or relocated; income and wealth inequality have increased, and work conditions
have deteriorated. These problems are present in Tunisia as in many peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, and in “peripheries” within core countries as well.

In the capitalist world-system, state capacity varies according to location in the various economic zones, which generally determines a state’s ability to command and distribute resources, but states also may prioritize certain social goods, such as their citizens’ educational attainment. Tunisia’s state spending on education doubled between 1960 and 1990, from 3.3% to 6.1% of GDP (UNDP 1995:174–75). Public expenditure on education benefited Tunisian women, as it enabled more of them to join the labor force. In 1989, nearly 21% of the labor force was female, although nearly half of working women were classified as “unpaid family workers” (ILO 1994: Table 2B; Moghadam 1998:67). Less than a decade later, most of the women in the labor force were salaried.

In 2016, some 38.4% of Tunisian women in the labor force had completed secondary school; 22% were university-educated, while 29.6% had completed primary school only. The proportion of women with higher education qualifications nearly quadrupled between 1994 and 2014 (République Tunisienne 2014:14). Although women with secondary schooling make up the largest proportion of women workers, the highest FLFP rates are found among university-educated women, as high as 70% among some age groups (but they also have the highest unemployment rates). Less-educated women have low labor-force attachment. As seen in Figure 1, between 2005 and 2013, the FLFP rate of women with just basic schooling actually declined to 20%; and for women with less than basic schooling, it was half that rate. For women with intermediate schooling (typically the equivalent of a high school diploma), the rate increased to 30%—but again, less than half the rate for university-educated women. This suggests that working-class women, more than (upper-)middle-class women, are encountering impediments to labor-force entry and attachment.

Tunisia’s higher education system has encompassed an ever-larger proportion of the female population. By 2010, female enrollment exceeded that of males at the secondary and tertiary levels, while the female-to-male ratio at the tertiary level was 120:100. Tunisian women students are well represented in medicine and the sciences; 22% of female students are enrolled in sciences, compared with 27% of male students (CREDIF 2015:68; UN Women 2015:258–67). The result of these educational advances is that Tunisian women are

![Figure 1. Tunisian female labor force participation by education level, age 25+, 2005–13](http://www.ilo.org/ilostat).

Source: Data from ILOSTAT (http://www.ilo.org/ilostat).
found in an array of professions (Table 2). The sectors of education and of health and social services are quite feminized (57.7% and 67% female, respectively). Other sectors where women make up a significant proportion are recycling, telecommunications, postal services, insurance, and IT (Boughzala 2013, citing INS, “Enquête micro-entreprises 2007”). Tunisian women are, indeed, more evenly distributed across occupations and professions than is the case in many MENA countries, and are also better represented in manufacturing than is the case elsewhere. Feminized manufacturing industries (with more than a 60% female share) are textiles and clothing and fur, and these sectors have been home to a section of Tunisia’s working-class and low-income female population. Women also make up a significant proportion of the workforce in “production of medical, precision, and optical instruments and watches” (16).

 Until the end of the 1980s, university graduates were easily absorbed by the labor market, primarily by government and public-sector institutions, and the rate of unemployment for graduates was well below 5%. This pattern began to change in the 1990s and reached alarming levels in the mid-2000s (Boughzala, Ghazouani, and Ben Hafaiedh 2016:2), with a rapid rise in the number of graduates and little demand, especially for skilled labor. Boughzala, Ghazouani, and Ben Hafaiedh (2016) note that the emergence of private higher-education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fields of study (2013-14)</th>
<th>Female share (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics and statistics</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life sciences</td>
<td>84.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>71.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Veterinary sciences</td>
<td>61.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and horticulture</td>
<td>71.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>71.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental protection</td>
<td>78.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transport services</td>
<td>58.4</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women in the professions</th>
<th>Female share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magistrates/judges</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyers</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical personnel</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacists</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in the media</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary school teachers</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school teachers</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University instructors</td>
<td>40%</td>
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TABLE 2. Women’s shares across tertiary-level fields of study and presence in the professions
institutions has not improved the (low) quality of educational outcomes in Tunisia. The focus group I conducted in March 2014 with a group of physics graduate students confirmed fears of difficulty finding jobs.7 Unemployment also is a problem for women with secondary schooling. In 2012, the unemployment rate reached 25.6% for women, compared with 14.6% for men. The surge in unemployment from 2011 to 2014 was almost entirely absorbed by women (Régie du Tourisme 2014:14; CREDIF 2015:70). Indeed, there has been a “substantial decline in employment opportunities for women in Tunisia since 2006” (Assaad et al. 2016:8). Well-qualified, university-educated women have the highest unemployment rate of any group in the population—nearly 44%, compared to 21% among similarly qualified men, in 2012. Women suffered the most from job losses after the 2011 revolution, losing nearly 54% of the 137,000 jobs lost (Mouelhi and Goaied 2017:4).

Female unemployment also is a legacy of lost manufacturing jobs. For decades, Tunisian manufacturing has recruited women at a rate unusual for an Arab country. In the 1980s and 1990s, manufacturing was by far the most female-intensive sector of the economy and the labor force (Moghadam 1998:68). Production of garments in Tunisia had close links with enterprises abroad through FDI, foreign contracting, and localization in export-processing zones. However, the success of the Tunisian garment industry was contingent on special trade policies giving it preferential access to the EU market. Once other countries, mostly in Eastern Europe, received similar treatment and Tunisia lost this privileged position, the performance of the garment industry worsened (Aita et al. 2008:164). Later, the Great Recession took a toll. The major trading partners and foreign investors in Tunisia’s manufacturing sector were from France, Spain, Italy, and to a lesser degree Germany, and over-concentration of exports on EU markets, especially southern ones, exposed Tunisia to recessions in those markets from 2009 onward (Jaud and Freund 2015:11–12), resulting in job losses and even higher unemployment. More job losses ensued after the 2011 political revolution, hitting women especially hard (Mouelhi and Goaied 2017). This is consistent with studies highlighting gender bias in hiring and firing decisions and the vulnerability of women workers who cluster in low-skill manufacturing sectors that are subject to global economic trends (Elson 1999; Kucera and Tejani 2014).

Throughout this period, to remain competitive, “flexible” employment contracts expanded in Tunisia’s private sector, which meant lower wages, more temporary work, and less job security for workers. Flexible forms of employment include job rotation, short-term contracts, part-time work, flexible work hours, weekend work, night work, and overtime work. A study found that workers involved in flexible work practices faced a higher risk of work injuries and more mental strain than workers in a more traditional work organization (Haoeras and Yagoubi 2008). Flexibility and low wages were behind the 2008 strikes in the industrial region of Gafsa, but conditions did not change. In 2012, workers benefiting from indeterminate-length contracts constituted 43% of the working population, but fully 44.6% had no contract at all, while 13.5% were on fixed contracts (CREDIF 2015:47). Young women did better than young men in terms of type of work contract, but their unemployment rates were much higher. In the new century, declining government expenditure entailed a contraction of the public-sector wage bill, and public-sector employment as a percentage of total employment in Tunisia continued to fall.8 As a result, large numbers of
young women from working-class households who wish to enter the labor market out of economic need, or those from middle-class households who aspire to a professional career, find that the lack of demand, combined with untoward working conditions in the private sector, blocks their entry into the workforce. These problems have preoccupied Tunisian women activists in both civil society and political society, who have pointed to the need to address institutional deficits.

As much of feminist political economy has noted, women’s involvement in the workforce requires institutional supports, notably an adequate social infrastructure (Elson 1999; Razavi 2007). Governments that have been responsive to this reality—whether due to involvement in the world polity, advocacy by women’s rights organizations, or development and planning needs—have adopted measures such as ILO Convention 183 on maternity protection, the UN’s Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, as well as domestic legislation prohibiting employment discrimination, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. Labor codes may also stipulate the presence of workplace crèches above a certain number of female employees. In his study of OECD countries, Thévenon (2013) finds that women’s employment rates respond to changes in tax rates and leave policies, but underscores the significance of the provision of formal child care services to working parents with children under age three. In their broad cross-national study, Besamusca et al. (2015) find that women are more likely to participate when paid maternity leave schemes exist and enrollment in pre-primary education is higher.

In MENA, enforcement and monitoring of labor law are absent, labor codes may pertain only to the public sector and the largest private enterprises, and in most countries paid maternity leave devolves on the employer only. Schooling begins at age six, and preschool facilities are rare. In interviews I conducted in 1996 (1998:111, 137), an Egyptian human resources manager blamed women workers for taking too much maternity leave, while Jordanian women employees stressed the need for institutionalized and affordable “baby care.” Ilkkaracan (2012) underscores the lack of work–family reconciliation measures as an important part of the explanation for low FLFP in Turkey (and elsewhere).

Tunisia has struggled economically since its political revolution. In 2016, the government reached an agreement with the IMF for a USD 2.8 billion bailout to cope with economic and political transitions and to help fund its 2016–2020 Development Plan (République Tunisienne 2016). The plan set a number of goals for the productive capacity of the economy, including promotion of modern agriculture, food processing and food security; protection of natural resources; and promotion of the knowledge economy, which would entail transforming half the universities into STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) institutions. For manufacturing, the government’s note to the IMF stated that the former development model—which “is based on pervasive state intervention that led to an economy dependent on low-value added exports, excessive regulation, and limited competition—will be changed swiftly” (24). The new plan was to provide incentives and allow competition for “backbone services” such as telecoms, transport, and professional services (21), for which Tunisia is seen as having significant export potential. Especially relevant to women’s employment are the goals to significantly increase women’s share of the labor force to 35%, expand
the size of the social-care sector by raising kindergarten enrollments from 35% in 2015 to 53% in 2020, and invest in child protection, sports, and home-care support. Such goals, if realized, could generate jobs for women in the social or care sector, release mothers for employment, and improve the quality of citizens’ social rights. The plan’s goals, however, came to be at odds with what were seen as austerity measures detailed in the government’s 2018 Finance Bill. This disconnect, as well as frustration with persistent unemployment and the high cost of living, triggered a new wave of protests across Tunisia in early January 2018.

**Feminist Organizations and Women’s Policy Agencies**

Scholars have noted the important role of women’s movement organizations—advocacy groups, women’s policy agencies, and feminist organizations—in effecting legal reform and public policy on issues such as domestic violence and quotas to enhance women’s political participation (Henderson and Jeydal 2010:44–56; Htun and Weldon 2018; Weldon 2002, 2011). Tunisia is a case in point and may be unique in MENA. The women’s rights movement in Tunisia has enjoyed a nearly uninterrupted history of “state feminist” policies, which has enabled decades of research, advocacy, and activism by the feminist organizations formed by academics, artists, journalists, lawyers, and other professionals. An early initiative was the establishment of women’s policy agencies, with government support, which have produced a wide array of policy-oriented research documents.

Women’s rights advocates emerged in the 1970s, and as products of both post-independence modernization efforts and left-wing movements, they developed a vision of expanded *citoyenneté*, or women’s full and legal citizenship. Two vibrant and long-standing feminist organizations formed in 1989 are the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (Tunisian Association of Democratic Women, ATFD) and the Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement (Association of Tunisian Women for Research on Development, AFTURD). Besides the first domestic violence hotline and counseling center, feminist activities included research on women’s status and the production of advocacy documents that criticized the shift in the 1990s to structural adjustment and neoliberalism. Sympathetic staff in the state-funded Union Nationale des Femmes Tunisiennes would cooperate with feminist advocates, as well as with UN agencies, on research projects and reports.¹⁰

In 1990 the government established the Centre de Recherches, d’Études, de Documentation, et de l’Information sur la Femme (CREDIF), with legal scholar Soukeïna Bouraoui as its first director, tasked with carrying out studies on various aspects of women’s economic conditions and reporting the results to the planning ministry. This was followed by establishment of the Ministry of Women and Family Affairs.¹¹ Tunisia then hosted the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), which received funding from various international development agencies (see e.g. CAWTAR 2001, 2006, 2007; Gribaa 2008–09). In 1997 the government enacted new policies to support divorced women with dependent children, as well as low-income working women, though these were criticized as insufficient (CREDIF 2002:13–14; PNUD and UNIFEM 2003).¹² Both CAWTAR and CREDIF continue to produce substantive studies on women’s economic, political, and social conditions, sometimes in cooperation with the women’s section of the country’s large...
trade union, the Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens (Tunisian General Labour Union), or UGTT (e.g., CREDF 2002).

Two publications exemplify how women’s policy agencies address the conditions of low-income women. A Spanish-funded project on economic repercussions of violence against young women in greater Tunis, conducted by AFTURD in 2008–09, noted that women’s concentration in low-wage and precarious “feminized” occupations such as domestic work or garments and textiles—and especially domestic work by teenaged girls from low-income families who should otherwise be in school—could make women and girls vulnerable to various forms of violence. The final report (AFTURD 2010) stressed that poor working conditions and the absence of social rights constituted a structural foundation for violence (see also ATFD 2010). A 2013 study commissioned by CAWTAR and financed by UNESCO and the Dutch government included in-depth interviews with young women and identified their vulnerability as absent or weak cultural capital, economic precarity, and social precarity. Interviewees complained of unemployment and lack of progress after the revolution; others expressed their support for parity but complained of the silencing of women’s voices; one interviewee celebrated the new freedoms after the revolution (Ben Salem and Ben Cheikh 2013).

Feminist organizations and policy agencies, therefore, have long played a critical and at times influential role in research and advocacy. Thus, in the wake of the 2011 political revolution and during the country’s democratic transitional period (2011–14), women’s rights advocates were prepared to confront backsliding. In 2012 a contentious debate within the constituent assembly and in civil society at large broke out when deputies from the Ennahda Islamist party tried to insert language into the draft constitution that referred to women’s and men’s complementarity (Charrad and Zarrugh 2014). Feminists and their secular allies organized protests and insisted on women’s full and equal citizenship. As they declared, “Nous ne sommes pas complémentaires; nous sommes complètes” (we are not complementary; we are complete [as human beings]). Eventually, the equality language was reinstated. The 2014 Tunisian constitution guarantees the principle of non-discrimination among citizens; stipulates equality between men and women; guarantees the right to work and healthcare; and commits the state to end violence against women. In the October 2014 elections, Tunisia’s parliamentary system of proportional representation and the parité law enabled a 47% female share of candidates, though only 12% were at the head of the party lists. Eventually, women won 31% of the seats in Tunisia’s new parliament.

Yet the sense of optimism evident in 2011 and 2014 has dissipated (Rahman 2018; Robbins 2016). A 2016 study of women in political and civic life in Tunisia and three other Arab countries, conducted by CAWTAR and financed by Oxfam, found a poor sense of citizenship and rights among many of the women interviewed, especially those from poor and marginalized areas. It describes the communicative difficulties of the women and identifies poverty, marginalization, and under-education as contributors to women’s self-exclusion and the main obstacles to their political participation. According to the study, there was “a lack of self-confidence in the way the women introduced themselves and defined their roles,” although some women “expressed a structured, rational view of political matters” (CAWTAR and Oxfam 2016:15–16) and were appreciative of civil society (21).
VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS ADVOCATES

According to a September 2015 survey by the National Democratic Institute, Tunisian women are dissatisfied with the cost of living and unemployment, strikes, the quality of public healthcare and public schooling, environmental quality and cleanliness, and the length of maternity leave in both public and private sectors. Fully 71% of respondents believed that the government and employers should introduce more favorable opportunities for women to join and remain in the labor force. These findings would not surprise at least two well-known Tunisian feminist advocates, who attribute the economic problems to neoliberal capitalism, as do other Tunisian activists.

At the Women’s Assembly of the 2013 World Social Forum in Tunis, Ahlem Belhaj, president of ATFD, cited the feminization of poverty, violence against women, and “an economic system that exploits women and men” as the main challenges facing the world’s women and Tunisia, and she called for international solidarity to end those realities. In an interview the following year, Nadia Chaabane, a member of the constituent assembly from the left-wing coalition group El Massar, expressed her preference for a socioeconomic program that combines the welfare state of the Nordic countries and the modèle participatif of the left-wing Latin American countries. As she explained: “We tested liberalism, and see where it brought us. We want an interventionist state that is not anti-business but is people-oriented.”

A long-time left-wing activist and professor who briefly joined the government in 2014 spoke of his frustration with those in the coalition government and in parliament who were reluctant to tackle neoliberal policies head-on. A health expert and left-wing professor committed to women’s equality nonetheless emphasized the importance of providing for poor and marginalized women in the country’s interior regions. These comments and the excerpts from interviews that follow confirm the postulates of feminist political economy and institutionalism regarding the gendered nature of development strategies, macroeconomic policies, and institutions, but they also draw attention to the class-differentiated effects of such policies.

As in most Arab countries, Tunisian women prefer to work in the public sector (Mouelhi and Goaied 2017:5), as those in the private sector are concentrated in low-skill employment, with little capacity for promotion (Ayadi and Mattoussi 2014:5). Samia Bouslama Letaief, head of the UGTT health sector and a long-standing AFTURD member, explains the conditions of women workers in the private sector:

By law, women workers should have good work conditions, but the reality is otherwise, especially in the private sector and in agriculture. In effect, no social insurance, 10-12 hour days, bad transport conditions, no paid maternity leave, no job security, work stoppage at any time, continued exploitation. . . . Textiles and electronics workers generally work within legally stipulated conditions. They are unionized and better organized.

Many Tunisian feminist legal scholars and advocates have cited the lack of decent work and supports for working mothers, weak enforcement of positive laws, unequal inheritance, and domestic violence as problems that keep women from advancing further (AFTURD 2006, 2010; Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016; CREDIF 2014, 2017; Tchaicha and Arfaoui 2017). Others emphasize conservative social norms. Leyla Mabrouk Khaiat, of the employers’
union UTICA (Union Tunisienne de l’Industrie, du Commerce, et de l’Artisanat), and herself an owner of two enterprises, commented on some attitudes toward women’s employment, expressed after the 2011 political revolution:

After the revolution, there was some talk that “it’s done; now women back in the kitchen” [c’est fini; maintenant les femmes dans le cuisine]. Even young boys were saying this on the streets immediately after the revolution. Our crisis—political or economic—affects women first and foremost.37

In recent years, Tunisia ranked 74th out of 189 countries in business climate (World Bank 2013), but women-owned businesses remain a small minority. In its 2016 note to the IMF, the government proposed regrouping the existing 289 microcredit associations into 24 institutes (one per region), to be governed by a new microfinance strategy (International Monetary Fund 2016:23). The women’s section of UTICA seeks to improve both women’s access to capital and the working conditions of women in the private sector. Mme. Khaiat, the UTICA official and business owner, agreed that much needs to be done to improve the conditions of women workers in the private sector, and especially in small urban and rural enterprises:

In general, there are laws, but no equality in many enterprises. There is inequality in wages, and women’s working conditions are not very good in the smaller enterprises, especially in the rural areas. The labor code distinguishes between public and private sectors; protection is not provided in much of the private sector. I do not agree with the division; we should have a unified law.38

Leyla Khaiat owns two enterprises in Monastir. One conducts research on chemicals and fabrics for use in textiles, and the other produces textiles. At the time of the interview, the factory had 48 workers, mostly women. While conceding that women’s unemployment may be due to lack of employer demand, and having stated the need for a unified labor code, she emphasized the salience of conservative social norms.

There are family responsibilities that affect a woman, causing much absenteeism. If the children are sick, she stays home; same if the husband is sick. We need to change the mentalities, and the men need to change, too. Especially in the interior of the country, [people] find the traditional domestic situation to be normal. Many women hand over their wages to their husbands—but not the women in my factory! In the northwest, the women produce nice things to sell to us but ask that the checks be written in their husband’s name. In such an environment and culture, how can a woman be an enterprise owner?

The persistence of traditional gender norms may be in part the legacy of the decision by the post-independence Tunisian state to retain one sharia-based principle in its otherwise liberal family law: unequal inheritance. Unequal inheritance has two pernicious effects: it puts potential women business owners at a disadvantage, given that many small businesses begin with some family-derived capital; and it reinforces the patriarchal male-breadwinner-and-female-homemaker ideal. In the latter part of the Ben Ali era, the ATFD organized a seminar on inheritance, attended by their own members and others; following the revolution,
feminist activists launched a campaign aimed at amending the family law to end unequal inheritance. Finding lackluster support among the local women they surveyed and much criticism from conservative Muslims, they decided to suspend the effort. However, the campaign was revived, with presidential support, at the urging of feminist legal scholars and parliamentarians.

As noted, interviews cited the need for better working conditions, including institutional supports for working mothers. The absence of support structures for working mothers is especially pertinent to women from working-class and low-income families, in contrast to professional women, who revealed in interviews their reliance on *femmes de ménage* (household help). According to Samia Letaief, the feminist trade unionist, a campaign has been underway to increase maternity leave to three months in both public and private sectors and introduce a parental leave of six months; she and other activists were awaiting passage of the bill by the national assembly. She expressed satisfaction with the constitution but pointed out that its normative elements had to be translated into policies to benefit the country’s women. Attuned to the needs and interests of working-class and rural women and echoing themes in a number of feminist policy reports, Letaief called for women’s economic empowerment: “We must have women’s enterprises. Women’s economic independence and control over income is very important, and we want to have women’s economic security. We are always mindful that *la citoyenneté complète* has to include the economic. Now when we say ‘development’ we mean full human rights.”

Emna Aoudi, teacher and feminist trade unionist, similarly praised the constitutional provisions but enumerated the following priorities for women:

First is elaboration of their rights. The constitution has to be translated into laws, especially for the private sector. Now that CEDAW reservations have been removed, the next step is to insist on adoption of ILO Convention 183 on maternity protection. The public sector provides two months of paid maternity leave, plus more at half salary, while the private sector provides only one month. We want to campaign for a year, but our campaign has to be based on the values and spirit and articles of the constitution, especially articles 21 and 29. The values of *citoyenneté* and of *liberté*—the laws must protect them. We must be faithful to the constitution. [Nous devons être fidèle à la constitution.] Even the Islamists voted for it, so they cannot oppose it! We need to have a strategic campaign drawn from the constitution to make a convincing case for the people and also to compel the government to adopt progressive legislation that would make it possible for more women to enter the workforce and to stay there.

The other is access of women to decision-making positions. It is scandalous that in our emergent democracy, which has seen the participation of women in the revolution and in years before, women’s wisdom and tenacity and experience are under-utilized. We have been present across the decades but have not been given our due. We need to be walking alongside the men, not behind them.

Decision-making posts in the UGTT are scarce for women as well. In June 2017, Samia Letaief confided that “after 70 years and many struggles, at the 23rd Congress [of the UGTT], we were able to pass a law stipulating at least two women in each union structure.” In a brief discussion at UGTT headquarters in Tunis on June 18, 2017, senior official Anouar
Ben Kaddour conceded that the tripartite delegation to the 2017 ILO conference in Geneva included just one woman from the UGTT, but gender parity was achieved in the governmental delegation from the Ministry of Social Affairs. Although women workers and employees represent a large proportion of the UGTT, and several women trade unionists hold leadership posts in the sectoral unions, feminist activists have been perplexed and dismayed by the absence of women in the UGTT executive committee. In the January 2017 elections, only one woman was elected to the 13-person executive, according to Letaief, who added that she nonetheless remains “committed to both syndicalism and feminism.”

Do the many women in parliament promote women’s interests? On some issues, such as passage of the strongest law to date on violence against women, they do. Indeed, the 2015 National Democratic Institute survey found that 45% of respondents considered women sufficiently involved in socio-political debates, while 32% thought the level was insufficient; 43% agreed that the women members of the National Assembly (parliament) defended the rights of women, while just 21% disagreed. In August 2017, President Essebsi named Bochra Bel Haj Hmida—lawyer, long-standing ATFD member, and member of parliament—as chair of the Committee on Individual Liberties and Rights. But will the women MPs take up issues pertaining to work–life balance, private-sector working conditions, and supports for maternal employment? Bel Haj Hmida told me that in 2015 that she had tried to form a women’s parliamentary caucus to press for women’s rights, but neither of the two main parties (Nidaa Tounès and Ennahda) was interested. Samia Letaief said of the women parliamentarians, “They approach laws with equality in mind but are greatly dependent on their parties and are not often the decision-makers.” In 2017, rifts within Nidaa Tounès and the government led to resignations and reshuffling of posts as well as stalemates and inability to act, especially on the economic front. A number of interviewees, including an MP and a former cabinet minister, expressed frustration and disillusionment with the government and ruling party. Nonetheless, Facebook group postings showed that Tunisia’s feminists were pleased with the recent overturning of the 1973 law banning Tunisian women from marrying non-Muslim men, and were hopeful that family inheritance would finally be made equal. In 2018, Iqbal Gharbi, a feminist lawyer and one of the four female members of the Commission on Individual Liberties and Rights, proudly posted photos and updates to the Facebook group, including information on a new bill for equal inheritance that was soon to be debated in parliament. (As of October 2019, it had not been passed.)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS
Tunisia uniquely presents a legacy of state feminism and a democratic political environment that enables advocacy and activism for women’s participation and rights (Mahfoudh-Draoui, Dridi, and Amira 2016). From post-independence state feminism to neoliberalism and then to political contestations in the post-revolution democratic transition, the problems and prospects of Tunisian women’s employment have been shaped by state capacity, world-system developments, and political battles. At the same time, Tunisia has developed an influential women’s rights movement, which has provided a balance to the structural and institutional disadvantages by highlighting inequalities and pressing for change. Tunisia’s society and economy rely on women for various economic activities, whether professional
or production; in particular, the country’s educational strategy has a stratum of women available to fill jobs in academia, the judiciary, medicine, and other domains. But structural problems and institutional deficiencies impede further progress. As a peripheral country dependent on exports, tourism, and foreign investment, Tunisia has been vulnerable to the vagaries of the world economy and to the changing fortunes of its European partners. Most Tunisian women remain economically inactive, unemployment plagues many educated young women, and private-sector working conditions are often undesirable. In the past 10 to 15 years, an untoward macroeconomic environment, combined with patriarchal institutional legacies, has hindered Tunisian women’s advancement, leaving a gap between women’s considerable legal rights and political representation on the one hand and their limited economic participation and rights on the other. The gap is especially wide for women from lower-income or working-class households and those in the country’s interior.

Attention to, and encouragement of, working-class women’s employment matters. Women’s participation in productive labor has been the entrée to their participation in political society; FLFP correlates with women’s parliamentary representation (Walby 2009), which in turn leads to women’s “interest legislation.” Iversen and Rosenbluth (2005:17) stated in their analysis of OECD countries that “paid employment makes women more left-leaning.” Wyndow, Li, and Mattes (2013) write that empowering women through education and employment may have a causal effect on democratic development by raising the benefits of political participation and expanding the broad base of support for democracy (see also Walby 2009). Conversely, unemployed women are less likely to hold egalitarian or emancipatory attitudes and more likely to support fundamentalist movements or ideologies (Blaydes and Linzer 2008); Ilkkaracan (2012) found this to be the case for housewives in Turkey. As more working-class and low-income women are encouraged to join and remain in the labor force through appropriate legal changes and institutional initiatives, conservative social norms could wane in Tunisia and attitudes could move in a more egalitarian direction.

A survey of Tunisian feminist studies produced since at least 2010, along with the interview data reported on above, shows concern over the persistence of patriarchal social norms, the lack of decent jobs, and the absence of institutional supports for working mothers. While they were proud of the constitutional articles on women’s equality, interviewees noted the gap between the text and the social realities, especially for women in the country’s interior and for low-income women in general. Interviews in Tunis in March 2015 and again in June 2017 yielded almost consistent expressions of frustration and disappointment with the government and political parties. The democratic transition has encountered serious economic conditions, which have generated several protest cycles, such as those in January 2018. As Samia Letaief stated, “The democratic transition has succeeded politically and more or less on its democratic project but not on its governance or development project.” Surveys conducted by Tunisia’s women’s policy agencies and by the National Democratic Institute, and interviews I have conducted with Tunisian women’s rights advocates, all point to the following policy needs: development plans and budgets that focus on good jobs for marginalized women in the country’s interior; incentives to allow women to establish
their own enterprises; longer paid maternity leaves covered by general revenue; and affirmative action plans to enhance women’s employment.

Feminist political economy and feminist institutionalism interrogate the macroeconomic environment, development planning, and state policies through a gender lens to assess the impact on women’s inclusion, equality, and economic and political empowerment. Through formal and informal institutions alike, various actors—families, state officials, development planners, researchers, donors—may promote or discourage female labor-force participation and attachment. In recent years, international organizations have echoed long-standing arguments by feminist economists and sociologists for policy and legal reform, not only to increase women’s labor-force participation but also to improve the quality of their employment through work–family reconciliation policies.

An IMF study shows that although neighboring Morocco tried to increase FLFP through gender budgeting (use of fiscal policy and administration to provide funding for gender equality), there was little change in either FLFP or the ratio of female to male labor-force participation (Kolovich and Shibuya 2016:28). What, then, would make a difference? Interestingly, the IMF now recommends targeted fiscal policies such as child care provisioning and subsidies to employers to help overcome reluctance to hire women. The IMF now agrees with long-standing findings of feminist political economy and social policy regarding the importance of child care and support services to reduce women’s unpaid time burdens in the home and free them for employment (e.g., Blau and Winkler 2017; Folbre 1994; Ilkkaracan, Kim, and Kaya 2015; Orloff 1993). And how would government pay for this? A recent study on the high levels of income and wealth inequality in MENA recommends more effective taxation, including “a progressive inheritance tax regime” (Alvaredo, Assouad, and Piketty 2018).

In sum, for Tunisian women to advance in the labor market and for Tunisia’s democratic transition to succeed, attention to both class-based and gender-based issues is important. Institutional supports for working mothers may be the imperative first step.

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NOTES


2. See the acknowledgments at the end of this article. My research in and on Tunisia began in 1990, and over the years I have acquired a large number of research papers, policy briefs, press releases, and advocacy papers issued by the feminist organizations, along with various government documents such as statistical profiles and CEDAW reports.

3. The interviewees from 2013 and afterward were drawn from a snowball sample facilitated by two long-standing Tunisian contacts; my later involvement in the Facebook group similarly began that way. I conducted all interviews, whether in person or via email, in French and translate them here. The 12 young graduates were chosen from a larger group of students who had responded to a written questionnaire in February/March 2013; five physics students constituted a focus group that took place at the University of Tunis El Manar in March 2014; the others were solo interviews carried out then and in 2015. For assistance in distributing the questionnaires and providing access to the students, I am grateful to Khedija Arfaoui, Leila Hjaije, and Samia Charfi Kaddour.


5. There is now a huge literature on this subject; see e.g. Oxfam 2014; Steger and Roy 2010; Stewart 2014; Wade 2004.

6. World Bank (2013: Figure 1.4). The source does not distinguish between universities and technical and vocational colleges in the tertiary sector. Instruction at Tunisian universities is in French.


8. By 2013, public-sector employment as a percentage of total employment in Tunisia had fallen to about 22%, just above the OECD average, and considerably lower than the oil-rich economies (The Economist, November 14, 2015, 47).

9. There have been at least two promises of financial assistance to Tunisia. Of the USD 25 billion promised at a May 2011 conference in Deauville, France, only USD 7 billion was disbursed. In 2016, in support of Tunisia’s 2020 development plan, a number of countries pledged USD 14 billion. All would be in the form of loans, which would only add to Tunisia’s debt burden. At the same time, the government also turned to the IMF for a loan.

10. See e.g. PNUD and UNIFEM (2003). On cooperation between feminists and allies within UNFT: personal communication and observation at a 2004 seminar in Helsinki on family law reform. See also Tchaicha and Arfaoui (2017).

12. At a 2001 CAWTAR seminar in Tunis, an official from the planning ministry spoke to participants about CREDIF’s establishment and purpose (personal observation).


14. Nadia Chaabane, interview, Tunis, March 6, 2014. The interview took place at the Bardo parliament building, of which Mme. Chaabane proudly gave me a tour.


17. Leyla Khaiat, interview, Tunis, June 20, 2017.


19. Personal communication, Khedija Arfaoui, Tunis, March 2015.


21. Interview, Samia Letaief, Tunis, March 5, 2014. The interview took place at AFTURD’s Tunis office (l’espace Tannassof), and Samia wanted me to know that she was speaking as a feminist syndicalist and an AFTURD member; the UGTT, she said, still had a way to go before it could integrate feminist concerns in its programs.

22. Interview, Emna Aouadi, Tunis, March 12, 2015. I met Ms. Aouadi at a preparatory meeting of the World Social Forum, which was to convene for a second time in Tunis.


24. This was achieved in July 2017. Three women public intellectuals—two lawyers and a university professor—interviewed in Tunis on June 19, 2017, informed me that Yamina Zoghlami, an Ennahda woman MP, supported the bill. On most matters, they added, Ennahda deputies stood counter to feminist demands.

25. Interview, Bochra Bel Haj Hmida, Tunis, June 21, 2017. Initially a member representing Nidaa Tounès, she quit the party, as did a number of other MPs, following an internal rift.
