Tunisian Women in the Labour Market

Thouraya Garraoui

HANAN: 'Did you know that the women we celebrate on Women's Day are in fact not the same as the women in the workforce'?

Interview with Hanan in Tunis (October 2021)

HANAN'S statement reveals a key dilemma of identity construction for Tunisian women: On the one hand, the positive public image of 'the ideal woman' is that of an educated and employed (upper-class) woman, on the other hand the reality of everyday experiences in the recent context of labour market inequalities and insecurities belies this. This double meaning reflects the situation of Tunisian women in the labour market – it has long been subject to discussion. Since gaining independence from French colonisation in 1956, successive Tunisian governments have passed laws in support of women's rights. They helped form a brilliant picture of the Tunisian woman. She is seen as an ideal representation of free, educated, and successful women in the MENA region. This ideal woman is however a mere image – a made-up creation, a public face for the world. As a symbol for all Tunisian women, she – the constructed ideal type – is represented in the state' reports and publications, and used as a reference point to demonstrate Tunisia's participation in 'modern development'. However, this is only half of the story, because there is also another reality – the local livelihoods of women struggling to make ends meet in everyday life. In these cases, Tunisian women are facing various troubles; increasingly so as female job opportunities and participation in the labour market continue to be marginalised, underpaid, and misrepresented – especially after the events of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, 2011 (Assad et al. 2017). The often precarious situation of females active in the labour market in Tunisia mirrors the deteriorating socio-economic conditions following the revolution. A multidimensional crisis has caused a shortage of resources, impacting livelihoods, a rise in social tensions, and a lack of security and support, as indicated in the introduction of this book. The powerful members of society exert control over resources and mobilise their powers to dominate marginalised groups, including working women, leading to widening inequalities and compelling them to experience forced mobility or immobility, depending on their aspirations and abilities.

Based on the stories of five young women, all of working age, this chapter aims to display and analyse the everyday experiences, challenges, and sufferings of females in the Tunisian labour market. Their stories represent the situation of both single and married graduates, working in different segments of the economy. Occupation in the public economy – or in any organisation owned and operated by the government – is seen as a preferred choice for women due to its socio-economic security, while employment in the private economy is often considered less secure, but still ranked higher than engaging in the informal sector, which offers the least secure and sometimes illegal working conditions. But does this picture hold true in reality?

Tunisia's weak economic development since the revolution in 2011 reflects the deepening inequalities between genders and between females themselves. The classic labour theory often distinguishes only between unpaid (domestic) activities for women and paid work for men (cf. Darmangeot 2016), while Marxist inspired feminists use the sexual division of labour theory and the economic class-approaches to show how females are more disadvantaged than the males of any class. The intersection of gender based social networks with other social networks reveals however female exploitation by both their families and the capitalist regime (cf. Galerand/Kergoat 2014). I apply however a different approach. The 'Diverse Economies' (Gibson-Graham 2008) perspective allows me to capture the stratification of workforce in asymmetric economies (Gertel/Audano, this volume). Based on these reflections and through semi-structured interviews, this chapter analyses the experiences of the five women alongside their working biography.

I start my argument with a methodological introduction in order to identify and position the five women in the larger field of unemployed graduates in Tunisia. It is only by unveiling their social position that we are able to know for whom they speak. I will then address their identity construction as Tunisian women. This type of newly educated woman is expected to leave 'the family home' and start looking out for herself, using education as a tool for social upward mobility via inclusion in the labour market and aspiring to improved economic independence. Next, I will follow the women's paths from their graduation up until the moment of the interviews, in order to understand their struggles and continuous efforts for repositioning in the labour market. Finally, I will tackle the question of gender discrimination. In reconstructing the trajectory of their job seeking journeys and their working experiences, I will reveal the mechanism of marginalisation, of systematic exclusion, and the suffering of females in the labour market, regardless of the nature of their jobs. These women face various forms of inequality that hinder their ability to access resources and secure their livelihood. This, in turn, impacts their capabilities, aspirations, imaginations, and how they shape their identities.

A note on the methodology: This chapter is one outcome of my research as a doctoral student at the University of Leipzig (2020–2023), where I investigated the situation of unemployed graduates in Tunisia. The following findings are mainly based on qualitative methods. Five in-depth interviews were conducted in order to collect labour market experiences of women, representing university graduates from the middle and lower classes. This mini-sample is composed first of Fatima and Amna, who were my ex-roommates in Greater Tunis from October 2018 to June 2019. Between the 8th and 10th of June 2022, I conducted semi-structured virtual interviews with them through a Messenger App. The sample also includes Amira, Hanan, and Asmaa, who I met during

a protest march organised by the Unemployed Graduates (*diplômés chômeurs*) in Tunisia. With them, I conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in different public places in Tunis during October 2021. These interviews were recorded via smartphone. All interviews were held in Arabic, in the Tunisian dialect. The use of the local language made my interviewees feel more comfortable as all were able to express themselves fluently. To interpret the findings, I applied a content analysis. Each interview was at first separately scrutinised before I used a comparative analysis to identify similarities and differences. Then, the quotes were selected, organised, and contextualised according to the goals of the chapter. I also collected statistical data between September 2019 and June 2022 from the National Institute of Statistics website and library.

Official statistics can provide a meaningful foundation for situation-specific qualitative data. However, there are only a few indicators used in the reports released by Tunisia's National Institute of Statistics to help with identifying and characterising graduate women, who are active in the workforce. As a result, there is a void in the numerical representation of employed or unemployed female graduates by motherhood, marital, socioeconomic status, income or strata. For this reason, I use my own fieldwork data to classify and position the five women selected for this chapter within a statistical universe (Garraoui 2023). The quantitative part of my doctoral research was carried out in the summer of 2021. Between July and September, 360 university graduates living in Greater Tunis and aged between 24 and 44 years, including both women and men, were interviewed in 12 localities. This included 166 female graduates who comprise the reference to which I relate the five interviews. I chose to use their assessment of the economic position of the family in order to categorise women in the workforce. Accordingly, I divided the female interviewees into three economic categories (Table 1), showing that, on the one hand, most interviewed females see their families in a 'good' economic situation (53% for singles and 65% married). However, the notion of 'good' often means 'it barely works' – their livelihoods are exposed (Gertel 2018b). On the other hand, women originating from families with 'bad' economic situations constitute a minority in the sample, they amount to 19 percent for singles and 13 percent for married women. It is clear that this group lives in economic insecurity and often cannot plan ahead as uncertainty is omnipresent.

The position and status of the five interviewees are shown in Table 2 & 3. Three of them fall into the category of single females from families with a 'good' economic situation. A married woman from a 'good' economic household and a married woman from a poor background make up the remaining two interviewees.

At the time of writing, a considerable number of people in Tunisia assume that a woman's economic condition is based on the stability of her family or on her spouse's economic situation. This is reflected in the relative positions of the five women in society. Their economic situation is not solely dependent on their personal situation, but rather linked to their family's educational and financial resources (cf. Gertel 2018; Audano 2023). Two of the women interviewed do not have a job or a consistent source of income, but they assess their financial condition as okay and consider themselves to be in a rather good economic situation. Their reliance on the financial support of their family largely explains this. When compared to married women, single women who still live with their family of origin are less capable of contributing to the living costs. A female's responsibilities change in tandem with her marital status and the birth of children. Generally, her

financial situation depends on the husbands' salaries, although women may contribute to the cost of living, often a result of her class position, revealing the mechanism of intersectionality (Braune 2018). Female's financial responsibilities grow especially after having children, depending, of course, on child-care obligations. Hanan's meagre wage as a salesperson in the private sector forces her to share household duties with her spouse. She, on the other hand, assesses her economic situation as poor and therefore implicitly her class position based on her husband's precarious financial status as well. Amna, a judge with a respectable salary, calculates the same way but with a different outcome. Amna reckons her financial state is neither good nor bad, but rather that it is quite good because of her husband's financial situation and her ability to utilise her own money for tasks after having had a child.

The five women's current professional situation is a result of their more or less successful transition from university to the workforce. They have all had different employment experiences that reflect the forced mobility from one job to another due to their hopes for a better future, their demanding jobs and their limited resources. These women are among numerous vulnerable social groups in Tunisia who face similar insecurities, including individuals involved in smuggling, irregular migrants, and workers in an unstable circular economy, as explored in subsequent chapters. How did the women begin their working lives? Fatima, for example, started working as a school teacher in 2016. However, she spent just one year using her academic qualifications as a secondary school teacher. She was sexually harassed by a parent and also by one of her secondary students, which paints a dramatic and unpleasant image of her work situation. Because of this, Fatima decided that she would always choose to work with young children as a teacher or as an animator. Amna first entered the workforce as a helper for an autistic student in a private primary school where she met Fatima. Before being recruited as a judge in the public sector, this work experience was regarded as a temporary job. Amira is a different case because she has not yet completed her transition from academics to the workforce. After 12 years of being unemployed (2011–2022), she is still without a job, she considers the lack of job offers, the expansion of corruption and the economic decline in Tunisia as the key reasons for her prolonged unemployment. Asmaa is a student at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of Tunis. During her summer vacation, she was employed as a photographer for a private business and currently, she is unemployed. Following graduation, Hanan finally worked repeatedly as a low-level labourer in factories and still works as a salesperson in different stores. Due to difficult working conditions, she has changed jobs many times and is still aspiring for a better job, which she hopes would be in the public sector. This job aspiration serves as her potential ticket to the upper class, where she imagines herself as the epitome of an ideal Tunisian woman, the same woman we celebrate on Women's Day.

Table 1: Marital Status and Families' Economic Situation of Females in Greater Tunis

	Families' Economic Situation			
Marital Status	**Very Good**	**Good**	**Bad / Very Bad**	**All**
Single	29	53	19	100
Married	22	65	13	100

Note: Answers in percentages. 'Bad' and 'Very Bad' are in the same category, as the latter consists only of two cases (n=166). Source: Garraoui (2023); Fieldwork 2021.

Table 2: Marital Status and Families' Economic Situation of the Interviewees

Economic Situation	**Amna**	**Asmaa**	**Amira**	**Hanan**	**Fatima**	**All**
Good => Single females	–	X	X	–	X	3
Good => Married females	X	–	–	–	–	1
Bad => Single females	–	–	–	–	–	0
Bad => Married females	–	–	–	X	–	1

Source: Fieldwork (2021–2022).

Table 3: Social Profile of Interviewees

Name	**Age**	**Marital status**	**Class**	**Degree**	**Discipline**	**Graduation year**	**Employment situation**	**Economies**
Amna	26	M	Mid	BA	Private law	2019	Judge	Public
Asmaa	24	S	Mid	BA	Geography	2019	Unemployed	–
Amira	37	S	Mid	BA	Private law	2011	Unemployed	–
Hanan	43	M	Low	Technician	Electricity	2002	Saleswoman	Private
Fatima	29	S	Mid	BA	History	2016	Teacher	Private

Source: Fieldwork 2021–2022. Note: The only two women with children are Amna and Hanan. Marital status: M=married, S=single. Class (Mid=middle, Low=lower) is based on self-assessment.

Identity Constructions of Women in the Labour Market

Hanan does not believe in a common identity for all Tunisian women and thus employs subjective criteria to construct a woman's identity. She distinguishes between different identities depending on women's perceptions of their economic class. According to her, a woman from an economically well-off class would always be working in good conditions and cannot be compared to a university graduate who is working in the private or informal sector. The portrayal of her perspective of 'the women we celebrate on Women's Day' is consistent with an ideal portrayal of a symbolic woman who has successfully graduated from university and is living a good life (i.e. originating from an upper class). This imagined person is, however, not the same one that, as an embodied human being, is participating in the labour market. This 'employed woman' may also be a university graduate, but she has to be considered as vulnerable and exposed to situations of unemployment and exploitation in the work place. Hanan sees herself as part of this often unrepresented category of women who work in the private economy and experience hard work conditions. This group of women suffers from a scarcity of resources that impacts their self-identification, especially when subjective elements are taken into account in shaping the identity of educated but poor women.

Fatima, contrary to her self-assessment of the economic situation of her family of origin, sees herself as a person that is suffering, exposed, and exploited. She distinguishes between exploited women who are working in the public sector and exploited women working in the private or informal sector, highlighting the exacerbated inequalities among active females depending on their employment circumstances. The marginalisation of women in the public sector might be expressed as obstacles or unjust treatment in her workplace, but she still considers this to be better than the alternative of being fired from work or disenfranchised in other kinds of ways. This displays how different levels of power – in terms of challenges and benefits – are unequally distributed between the females. Consequently, this reveals the social hierarchy where employed females working in the public economy are working under conditions of exploitation (Makinnon 1987), but are still in a better position when compared to the remainder of employed women, especially those working in the informal economy. Fatima frames this as: 'There is a difference between exploitation of a first kind, exploitation of a second kind, and exploitation of a third kind'. Notwithstanding the fact that existing laws support women's rights, women continue to face social obstacles and various aspects of discrimination in the labour market revealing their feelings of injustice, mistrust of laws, and rethinking the revolution goals from 2011 that led to unexpected contradictory results, as mentioned in the introduction of this volume. Since independence, Tunisian women are still expected to perform a great deal of unpaid work as maids in their families' homes and as married women in their households. A woman's main role is to become or be a housewife. The paid work is often still left to the men, who are considered to be the supreme authority in the family only because of their gender. For this reason, the importance of women is, depending on class and livelihood situation, often reduced to that of a housewife.

But a top-down transformation by the state has been underway for decades and the imagined 'ideal' woman was ascribed a key role to the modernisation of society. After po-

litical independence the most important innovation was the 'personal states code' which consists of a series of laws, proclaimed on the 13th of August, 1956 by order of Ali Bey of Tunis, which was then implemented on the 1st of January, 1957, with the aim to establish equality between men and women in several areas. As a result of this law Tunisian women have been given more freedom to work outside their household. They also benefitted from the abolishment of polygamy and raising of legal marriage age, and were able to better enhance their professional status thereafter. Taking care of household affairs had been replaced by educational achievement in some part. Consequently, females' illiteracy rates have decreased from 96 percent in 1965 to 26 percent in 2014 (INS 2014). Rising educational rates and new identity options increasingly helped Tunisian housewives transform into 'educated' housewives. These educated women simultaneously engaged in paid and unpaid activities. They also had to make sacrifices though: they had to organise the household and care for the husband and children, either by themselves or with the support of siblings and relatives, all while also working for money. This reveals the gap between political visions and juridical prescriptions on the one hand, and the complexities of the everyday reality on the other.

The theory on the sexual division of labour (Giguère et al. 2020) applies the terms 'capitalism', 'exploitation', and 'work conflicts' to explain male domination and asymmetrical power relations in work contexts. Too often the domestic work by women is not considered labour. Therefore, females are subjected to excessive exploitation, both at home and also in the work place. Amna, as mother and judge, is an expert in both law and family management and exemplifies this. She characterises employed Tunisian women as 'fighters' even if they work in the public economy: 'Being a woman in Tunisia means that you are a fighter between work, home, and child-rearing. Motherhood itself is a full-time job'. An opposite and rather male-dominated perspective is reflected in a Tunisian proverb that states 'A woman has only her house, whether she has been educated or not'. This reveals how a part of the Tunisian society still assesses and judges women, even after they have graduated. This perspective disparages educational achievements in comparison to the vision of being a housewife. Women with multiple roles are usually subject to misrepresentation and exploitation at the same time.

All five interviewees feel that, as college graduates, they have a responsibility to ensure the stability of the family's economic situation. This sense of obligation reflects temporarily expanded social reciprocity relationships. Their families have invested in their education because they consider a college degree as a promise for a secure future in the best case, and if nothing else, an investment to reduce uncertainty. Parents often save large portions of their money to fund the educational aspirations of their children's futures (Garraoui 2023). For example, Hanan is aware of the hard sacrifices her father, a poor farmer, made to enable her to go to university. He considered it the only way to improve his family's economic situation. However, the implementation of this idea dates back to before the 1990s, when the Tunisian state was still hiring university and secondary school graduates to work in the public sector. At that time, a university degree was considered the key to social advancement to a higher socioeconomic position. However, although the economic conditions have changed since then, Tunisian families still believe in this now out-dated social promise (ibid.). Women in particular, who continue to prefer permanent employment in the public sector, study hard to obtain a diploma, as they

see this as a prerequisite for employment with the state and thus for realising a family dream. Amira expresses her sense of responsibility in supporting her family in saying:

> Even when I wanted to work in the private sector, it was not to earn my own income, but rather to support my father and mother who invested a lot of money for my education and I wanted to give them something back.

Similarly, Amna shares her experience before marriage: 'Yes, at that time my situation was not very bad, but I wanted to support myself and my family'. These female graduates are taking responsibilities and are ready for sacrifices in order to support their (extended) families, even at the expense of their wellbeing and livelihoods. This puts women under stress to become a 'super human-being' and that she has to accept sacrifices, 'more than she can handle', according to Fatima.

In conclusion, the stereotypical statements about women and their role in the labour market are hardly meaningful. The five Tunisian women reveal a spectrum of different identity positions. Despite individual socialisation, personal development, and different social careers, they experienced similar structures of exclusion and disregard that have shaped their experience and thinking, not to mention embodied imprints, such as from sexual harassment. Scott draws attention to this when she states that 'the social and the personal are imbricated in one another and that both are historically variable. The meanings of the categories of identity change and with them the possibilities for thinking the self' (Scott 1991: 795). Therefore, it is problematic to simplistically assume that social contexts, perspectives, and societal positions of women allow us to conceptualise a unified collective identity. The women portrayed may be united by the profile of former college graduates who face specific difficulties in the labour market due to their gender and economic class. Yet, despite similarities, they are also unequal. Some of them (temporarily) take on an identity of the suffering and exploited, while others, of the responsible and educated woman, may also have to make sacrifices.

Women's Discrimination in the Labour Market

The five women have different employment experiences to share. Based on her engagement in two different economic spheres, Amna reports on her lived inequalities. After a miserable experience in the informal economy, she got the opportunity to work in the public sector – and now believes that she is lucky, as she was able to upgrade her position. In her first job she worked as a caregiver of an autistic child, where she was hired by verbal agreement. The payment was low and the working conditions were not secured. She earned only 600 Dinars per month (about 178 Euro in November 2018) for six hours of work per day. She did not receive social insurance nor were vacation or employment rights granted to her. Now, she is working in the public sector as a judge and she receives a good salary, has legal work hours, and regulated vacation rights. But these benefits in the public sector do not compensate for the persisting fragility of working conditions. Amna expresses her feeling of being tired due to an ever-increasing workload, as the number of employees is not growing at the same pace as the number of expanding duties. She is

entrusted with several tasks at the same time, which gives her the feeling that she cannot do justice to the tasks. As the stress increases and recovery time decreases, she begins to feel exploited.

Fatima and Hanan have also worked in different jobs. They describe their employment experiences similarly, even if there have been some differences. Both women keep changing jobs because they are subjected to bad employment conditions and suffer from a lack of financial resources. They share the experiences of working without contracts or social insurance and they were hired via oral contracts. To describe the position of an employee without a legal contract and social insurance Tunisians use the local term *taht hit* (under the wall). This term signifies that the employee is hidden, misrepresented, and working outside the boundaries of the legal workplace, thus lacking security. Both women have been exposed to exploitation and discrimination. However, Hanan was luckier than Fatima because she could quit her job when she felt insecure. Fatima, unfortunately, was, as we already know, subject of violence during her work as a secondary teacher in a private school. She has been sexually harassed many times just because of her gender. 'I also remember that I was physically and morally attacked when a woman tried to dig her nails into my eyes and used the worst kinds of profanity'. As we follow Fatima's daily experiences and delve into other cases presented in the following chapters, it becomes evident that mobility and workplace security pose significant challenges in Tunisia. These issues were particularly amplified during the post-revolutionary period, marked by heightened levels of violence, conflict, and social upheaval. Sadly, women were often on the receiving end of harassment and violence, highlighting the urgent need for change. Hanan refers to another issue: to the unequal choices women have in the labour market. She is convinced that the family's economic situation pre-defines female's inequalities in the labour market. She believes that women from low economic classes, who lack resources, are more exposed to exploitative working conditions in the informal economy. She illustrates her beliefs with this example:

> I know a woman, who has a master's degree, but she works as a cleaning lady in the commune. […]. And she works for less than 200 Dinars (about 60 Euro in October 2021) a month. But why does she work? This woman continues working in the same job because she needs the money.

According to her understanding, women from well-off families would have options to look for alternatives, as they do not experience the same financial pressure. They can make choices, such as Asmaa, who preferred to continue her academic research after a miserable working experience in the informal economy. At the time when she had quit her despised job, her family was taking care of her study and life expenditures.

Women's inequalities in the labour market are also reflected in official unemployment statistics. The unemployment rates are unequally distributed between females according to the age groups: 74 percent of the female unemployment rate is 'produced' by women aged between 20 and 34 years (INS 2014, researcher's calculation). More precisely, the highest rate (33%) concerns women aged between 25 and 29 years, which represents a group of young adults in the transition period between education and a first job. Unemployment among these individuals mirrors the national trend of youth unemployment,

highlighting a discrepancy between demographic changes and economic downturn. Ben Amor (2012) explains: 'This is linked in particular to non-integration or difficult integration rather than recruitment. Similarly, this unemployment is described as categorical, affecting graduates of higher education' (Ben Amor 2012: 6). When referring to the level of formal instruction, it is important to consider that female graduates are, indeed, the most affected by unemployment when compared to the rest of women who are of working age. In 2014, unemployed female graduates represented 44 percent of the total female labour force, which was the highest reported rate. Unemployment rates increase in parallel with the level of education. University female graduates are thus facing greater challenges in entering the labour market, which is more open towards non-qualified and often underpaid employees. This is particularly the case for female graduates in law, economy, and management, as they are the most affected by unemployment and gendered inequality. Their skills are not matched with the labour market requirements, which demand either non-qualified graduates for simple tasks like assembling and packaging, or graduates specialising in the usage of technologies and innovations.

Female university graduates spend long periods of time looking for jobs that match their qualifications (Observatoire National de l'Emploi et des Qualifications 2013).

> This situation shows the Tunisian paradox of graduate and non-graduate employment. Indeed, the relationship between the level of education and the unemployment rate has been transformed in favour of the non-graduates (Kthiri 2019: 9).

As a result, job seeking or unemployment periods are longer for female graduates, which subjects them to stressful psychological situations where they are the victims (cf. Bakari 2015). Fatima describes her situation with the following words: 'The most difficult experience of unemployment is the psychological damage and suffering that has made my whole life turbulent and unbalanced'. Moreover, female graduates often experience competition, envy, discrimination, and/or valorisation only because of their university degree. Their level of education becomes an indicator of the growing inequalities between women and men and between women themselves in the labour market. Hanan has been discriminated because of her university degree. She thinks that she was only fired from her job because her manager was envious that she was holding a higher educational degree. Fatima had the same impression when her female manager in the child-care school tried to devalue her efforts. Fatima reported that her non-graduate manager was envious of her educational level and that she assigned her cleaning tasks for that reason. The manager was also disparaging her work, blaming her, and systematically devaluing her results at the end of each month. Amna has also suffered from the behaviour of the school guard who was belittling her by using demeaning expressions. Moreover, her female colleagues were trying to degrade her efforts during the first period of the job. However, the treatment changed when they learned that she as a university graduate was waiting for a job as a judge.

> Their behaviour towards me changed only because they accidentally learned from one of my escort companions that I was waiting for my judgeship. The way they treated me

became the opposite and they started to flatter me, offering me help and even some services.

Amna's experience can be considered an exception on account of her university degree, and probably more so resulting from her employment perspective as a judge, which transformed her into an allegedly important person 'with influence'. This saved her from further discriminations.

In brief, this section highlights the unequally distributed structural inequalities between females in the labour market. The better positions are held by female graduates who come from well-off class positions and are working in the public economy, while females who have not graduated or come from lower classes often work in informal economies and are more likely to be exposed to marginalisation and discrimination from both male and female bosses as well as colleagues. These kinds of inequalities can be seen as partly responsible for the weakening of the female position in the work place.

Gender Inequalities in the Labour Market

Gender inequalities represent another aspect of labour market discrimination, as highlighted in the official statistics. Female labour participation is considered weak in comparison with the male rates. Both, the employed female population and the female activity rate in the labour market rose from 19 percent in 1975 to 28 percent in 2014. Simultaneously, the male rates decreased from 81 to 72 percent. This slight increase of the women's entry into paid labour is an outcome of the diversification of the economic fabric that offers more opportunities for female employment in different sectors. Bakari (2015) explains that the growth of female participation in the labour market is due to the expansion of the education, health, and service sectors. Changing mind-sets and the establishment of work codes have also contributed to this expansion. He further considers the demographic evolution during the 1990s as responsible for creating a stronger female labour demand.

Moreover, the on-going non-separation of entanglements between unpaid domestic activities and paid work has strengthened the male domination of labour (c.f. Giguère et al. 2020). Women accept unpaid work without sharing the responsibility with men equally. This has given a 'green light' that ultimately strengthened males' domination in economic activities and the related networks, which diminished female participation in the labour market as a result. On the one hand, unequal job creation privileges males (Observatoire National de l'Emploi et des Qualifications 2013). On the other hand, this is further compounded by the uneven regional distribution of job offers that are concentrated in urban and coastal areas; labour opportunities thus require spatial mobility. Because of social restrictions, females – predominately those from the lower classes and interior regions – are often hindered in moving to a city or to make a long commute to a workplace. This forced immobility makes women's integration into the labour market less likely to be achieved and they are exposed to unemployment or accept local jobs in the informal economy as a result (Asaad et al. 2017; Baccouche 2018).

According to Fatima's experiences, females are exposed to exploitation in the work place more often than males. They still face very bad working conditions sometimes, even with the establishment of the employment code. According to the public data, females are employed in different positions and economic sectors. Private employers often prefer to grant women a working opportunity only so as to facilitate easy and socially accepted mechanisms of exploitation. From the employer's perspective, recruiting a female means fewer costs. Low salaries, long working hours, and illegal working conditions are more frequently accepted by females than males. Fatima emphasises:

> These were difficult moments and I always wanted to overcome them. But I cannot receive the same conditions as men.

Speaking from personal experience, Asmaa addresses the question of the gender wage gap. She was working as a photographer in a private store in 2021. Next-door was a private library with four employees, one of whom was a woman. All the employees were responsible for receiving and organising materials. However, even though the female was doing the same sales operations as the men, she was paid less than them. Asmaa comments:

> She was in charge of selling things and worked like them. But they were getting 400 Dinars (about 140 Euro in August 2019), while she was only receiving 250 Dinars (about 75 Euro at the same period).

These examples reveal situations where employed women are exposed to gender discriminations. However, these inequalities in the labour market are not only affecting employed women, but they are also relevant for unemployed women. Official data confirm that more women than men are unemployed. Between 1975 and 2018 female unemployment rates increased from 11 to 23 percent (INS 2019), while male unemployment rates increased more slowly in roughly the same period, amounting to only 12 percent. This, once again, confirms the difficulties that women face in entering the labour market (cf. BIT 2015). There are also multiple periods of insecurity: Fatima as a university graduate has been jobless several times. She describes the impact:

> I experienced unemployment after graduation between May and September 2016. It was a bad experience when I remained for a period of time without work and income, especially in Tunis, due to pressures to pay rent, electricity, water, transport, food and all other related expenses. The psychological effects were very strong and depressing.

With these words, Fatima describes her experience of remaining unemployed for five months after graduating in 2016. She considers her periods of unemployment as the hardest times she ever faced. As a female living away from her family and trying to prove herself, she did not receive any support. But she faced the bad feelings bravely and managed a very stressful situation by herself.

Long-term unemployment (i.e. for more than three years) occurs more frequently for females (24%) when compared to males (18%) (INS 2014). This chiefly concerns un-

employed female graduates. They stay unemployed for a long duration. According to the Observatoire National de l'Emploi et des Qualifications report (2013), about 39 percent of women are employed in sectors or activities that are completely outside of their specialties or training, in contrast with only 20 percent for men. Assad et al. highlight:

> Educated young women are therefore more likely to be 'trapped' by the opportunities available in their local labour markets. But it may not correspond to their educational qualifications (Asaad et al. 2017: 2).

When Fatima realised that she would not find employment in the public sector, she sought a permanent job in the private sector. However, most job opportunities in the private sector are in industry and agriculture and are more suitable for men or women without a university degree, as the working conditions are harsh and the work is poorly paid. Therefore, Fatima continued to look for work in education where her employment aspirations could be satisfied. This is why, she repeated many times, that the hardest challenge for her was the job-seeking journey: 'The difficulty here lies in the whole searching process'. Or: 'The most difficult thing is the journey to find work'. And: 'At the beginning of each year, the job seeking journey begins'. Females often look for employment opportunities that also correspond to their private situation. Their professional activities in these cases have to be complementary and should not interfere with the time reserved for domestic work. This can be achieved at the expense of the salary, time management, or other employment rights. This kind of complexity in everyday life is often not represented by labour theories or by official publications. This can be explained by the rigidity of capitalism and the lack of implementation of existing laws, combined with a public, male-dominated rhetoric that degrades and disciplines women in society in order to maintain traditional structures. So, are Tunisian women to be seen as victims or are they part of what is happening? Does the situation of women after the revolution reflect the general economic deterioration at the lowest end or was it the best that was possible under the given circumstances?

Conclusion

Since gaining its political independence, the Tunisian government has taken significant steps towards improving the status of women in the country and recognising their crucial role in building modern societies. These efforts have led to increased educational opportunities, greater participation in the workforce, and improved access to socio-economic and political rights for women. Despite these measures, women still face various forms of inequality, insecurity, sexism, patriarchal exploitation, and other deprivations in the labour market. These challenges are exacerbated by their disadvantaged socio-economic status, stemming from their limited access to resources and capabilities. The situation has further worsened during Tunisia's post-revolution phase. The country is grappling with economic decline, social conflicts, and political disturbances that disproportionately impact the society as a whole, but has a greater negative effect on women. The recent developments make it more challenging for women, particularly those from lower and

middle-class backgrounds, to secure employment and access livelihood resources. They are particularly vulnerable to unemployment, discrimination, and exploitation, and often have to balance paid employment with domestic responsibilities, further adding to their already difficult circumstances. Under these conditions, women's aspirations develop into a demand for their basic rights as valuable, non-discriminatory participants in working life on an equal footing with men. To address this issue, the findings of the chapter, along with the sexual division of labour theory and employment theories, suggest a need to redefine the concept of work to encompass both paid work and household responsibilities, including care work. Additionally, it is crucial to restore the workforce as a source of innovation and productivity, regardless of gender. This requires revising employment regulations and norms in the labour market and workplaces to ensure gender equality and equal opportunities for women and men, as well as among women themselves. Moreover, it emphasises the significance of translating laws into practical actions and treating all women equally under the law, regardless of their backgrounds, particularly in the private and informal sectors. In these situations, work output and contributions should be the only criteria considered, rejecting any form of discrimination based on differences. To pave the way for a brighter future, I also recommend concentrating on improving the actual working and living conditions of women, rather than solely relying on the implementation of laws and policies on paper. By broadening the perception of free, educated, and empowered Tunisian women, we might seek to enhance opportunities for females across all backgrounds to achieve such status. This effort is aimed at empowering not only the privileged few but also marginalised Tunisian women in the workforce, with the goal of celebrating all Tunisian women as equals on Women's Day.

Acknowledgement

This work is based on the research supported by the ACCESS Network (African Centre for Career Enhancement and Skills Support; https://access-centre.org) and Leipzig University with the funding from DAAD and the Federal Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ).