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«I was in exile before leaving the country». Tunisia and the Feminist Continuities of Activism

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Abstract. What happened to the women who participated in the 2010-2011 Tunisian revolutions and subsequently left the country? While scholarly work has extensively delved into the engagement of the young generations who participated in these transformative times, there has been a limited attention to the experiences of women who subsequently underwent journeys of exile. This article seeks to empirically fill this gap by looking at the political trajectories of six women activists, spanning from their participations in the 2010-2011 Tunisian uprisings to their experiences in exile. Drawing on ethnographic research and life history interviews conducted between 2021 and 2023, this article shows the transformations in these activists' political trajectories before they left the country. Furthermore, it outlines how, even in exile, queer and feminist activism has provided these women a space of engagement through a "multiple identifications" of their political attitudes and interests. Adopting a social movement approach focused on the continuities of engagement, this article contributes to two fields of the literature that have been traditionally studied in isolation: the literature on gendered borders and the literature on gendered transformations throughout revolutionary times. Finally, the article emphasises the importance of studying the transformations of meanings of engagement while analysing political continuities.

Keywords: continuities, political trajectories, SWANA revolutions, gendered borders, feminist and queer engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Scholarly work has extensively explored the engagement of the young generations who took part to the protests that swept through the SWANA region (Southwest Asian and North African region) between the end of 2010 and 2011. However, there has been a more limited discussion on the stories of the young women who participated in these eventful moments and subsequently experienced journeys of exile. With a focus on the Tunisian context, this article seeks to address this academic gap and centres its analysis on a biographical exploration of six women's political engagement from their participation to the 2010-2011 uprisings to their exile. Grounded in extensive ethnographic research and life history interviews conducted between 2021 and 2023, the article seeks to shed light on these women's continuation of

activism amidst political, spatial and intimate disruptions. In this way, by bridging the dimensions of politicisation, migration and interpretations of engagement, the analysis aims to contribute to the scholarly literature on gendered migration and revolutions in the SWANA region. Additionally, it seeks to enrich the social movement literature by offering insights into how activism is sustained at the biographical level.

To this purpose, this article proceeds as follows: section two provides a theoretical exploration of the intersections between women's participation in the 2010-2011 SWANA revolutions and the scholarly work on gendered borders studies; section three will introduce the fieldwork research that underpins this article, along with the processes of data reduction and analysis; section four delves into the core of the empirical analysis, revealing the processes of activists' reconversion or "orientation" and observing the sustained engagement of these women activists in queer and feminist movements; finally, the concluding section briefly summarizes the empirical findings and discusses their relevance and their contribution to the existing literature.

2. THE SWANA REVOLUTIONS AND THE "GENDERED ORDER"

The 2010-2011 uprisings that spread in most of the SWANA region were firstly narrated by many commentators through a look of surprise towards these events, picturing the people who rose to revolt as finally exiting from a long period of political quiescence, authoritarian rule and ideological void, as Pace and Cavatorta (2012) underline. A plethora of analysis has emerged since these revolutionary times, ranging their focus from structural explanations around the causes of the revolts to micro explorations on the impact of these events on the lives of revolutionaries (Volpi and Jasper 2018; Dakhli 2020). However, as Kréfa and Barrières (2019) notice, most of these studies have concentrated on the heterosexual man as the main subject of study, disregarding – until more recent years – a gendered analysis of such times. They emphasise, in particular, that a thorough consideration of gendered analysis goes beyond merely introducing a new exploratory variable. Instead, it involves examining how the entire "gendered order" is put into place during both ordinary and extra-ordinary time, shedding light on its possible ruptures, continuities and restructuration across these times.

On this purpose, the two authors put into question the relationship between the "gendered order" and moments of crisis, highlighting how such moments

may create opportunities for overturning established gendered norms, and yet they also carry the potential to perpetuate, strengthen or establish a new "gendered order". The reproduction of the «division of militant work» that Lacombe (2019) underlines is one of these possible counter-effects, revealing how pre-existing systems can be re-constituted in the post-crisis order. As observed by Allam (2017) and Pratt (2020), gendered norms can equally be instrumentalized by the emerging political orders in the new political landscapes. Pratt (2020), for instance, points out how regimes, during counter-revolutionary phases, have often bolstered their legitimacy by emphasising women's protection and safety, while engaging in the repression of their rights and in violent actions against them. These insights can be extended across other temporal and spatial dimensions, illustrating the reproduction of the "gendered order" throughout different moments of crisis (Viterna 2013).

This existing research has primarily delved into the changes within the "gendered order" throughout the 2011 revolutions and their aftermaths across various contexts. The focus has been particularly directed towards the experiences of women actively involved in the revolutions, of those affiliated with political organisations or collectives and finally of those whose personal lives underwent profound intimate transformations, despite not directly participating in these momentous events (Hasso and Salime 2016). Rooted in a post-colonial feminist tradition, these studies expand the understanding of women's political agency and emphasise their intersectional characteristics and their multi-positionality across spaces of action (Hasso and Salime 2016; Pratt 2020). However, the existing literature fails to address the intimate and political transformations experienced by women who participated to these revolutionary moments and subsequently migrated abroad. Although there are exceptions in those studies directly addressing the persecution and forced migration of women (Freedman *et al.* 2017), the primary emphasis remains on the transformative aspects of the migratory experience, rather than on the prior processes of politicization.

Expanding beyond the literature on the SWANA 2010-2011 revolutions and subsequent migration(s), significant insights on the topic can be found in the emerging studies on gendered borders studies (Freedman *et al.* 2023). These studies consistently direct attention, on the one hand, to the multiple sites where the "gendered order" is perpetuated or reversed in the lives of migrant women; on the other, to how women's lives have been transformed throughout the migratory experience. While these studies do recognise the importance of

political agency – by stressing the politicisation of women’s subjectivities throughout their journey – they tend to overlook how women who were previously been politicised¹ could either maintain or transform their political activism after migrating².

Furthermore, as we have observed in the literature on migrations and the SWANA revolutions, these analyses privilege a focus on experiences of “forced migration”, considered as the direct consequence of structural conditions (a situation of threat) and/or individual conditions (a situation of threat specifically directed to person or a group). This article aims instead to encompass various experiences in which the migratory journey unfolds. Following Nouss (2015), I will employ broader definitions of “exile”, including in the analysis different experiences of expatriation, forced migration and political exile³. Regardless of the specific conditions prompting these women activists to leave their country, the empirical analysis indicates the pivotal role that a growing disaffection with the political landscape in the country and the perceived sense of revolutionary loss played in the decision to migrate. As emphasised by Miranda⁴ (2023: 221), it is indeed crucial to move beyond a

Unilinear vision linking poles of emigration and immigration, governed by causes (demographic, economic, political and now also ecological), polarised around the ways in which national borders are crossed and the legal statuses (worker, refugee, asylum seeker, students, etc.) attributed to migrants at the moment of the border crossing.

Furthermore, she stresses how it is crucial to consider the «meaning and significance they [the gendered subjects] give to their experience» (Ivi: 221-222), specifying how an approach to continuities should not be equated with unilinearity; on the contrary, it acknowledges how, in the continuum of experiences, meanings and interpretations are transformed across contexts. Following Miranda’s suggestions, the article aims specifically to unravel this dichotomy through the social movement literature on the collective or individual forms of “sustainment” of activism. In particular, this

article refers to Taylor’s definition (1989) of «abeyance structures» to identify collective forms through which activism is sustained, and to Corrigan-Brown’s definition (2011) of «individual abeyance» to refer to forms of continuation of engagement at the biographical level. This conceptual framework has found application in various studies, ranging from the analysis of activists’ pause and later re-engagement in life to research on forms of reconversion or professionalization, as in Fillieule and Neveu’s work (2019). These terms refer to activists’ deploying their militant capital (including the knowledges, practices, and/or relationships cultivated in previous forms of engagement) into other forms of engagement or/and in the professional sphere.

Despite its widespread applications, this framework has been rarely employed in studies addressing the individual sustainment of activism across experiences of migration and throughout revolutionary processes, to which this article seeks to contribute. Following a social movement perspective on continuities, the analysis therefore contributes to the scholarly literature on gendered migrations and revolutions in the SWANA regions, by empirically examining their concrete intersection. Finally, as suggested by Miranda (2023), it points out to women’s subjective interpretations of both their political activism and exilic experiences, outlining the transformations, negotiations and re-adaptations of meanings of engagement.

3. METHODS

As outlined in the introduction, the main aim of this article is to study the trajectories of six women activists and their journeys of activism, tracing their involvement from the 2010-2011 revolts to their subsequent exile. The biographies of these six women activists were gathered through a combination of ethnographic work and life history interviews. Embracing Abu-Lughod (1990) «polyvocal ethnography», I integrated numerous voices of analysis, including my own as a researcher, to construct a dialogical experience during an extended fieldwork.

I conducted the ethnographic work in Paris and in different locations of the Ile-de-France region between 2021-2022, where I participated in political events organised by the participants to my research, including art exhibitions, conferences, workshops, political meetings and informal gatherings. My own history of feminist engagement, my previous life experiences in Tunisia, my Southern-Italian background and my positionality as a young woman are all elements that have greatly contrib-

¹ With reference here to their direct participation and engagement in political organizations.

² Some exceptions in Bereni (2012) with her reflections on the «space of the women’s cause» and the transferability of this frame of engagement; in Dyrness (2016) with her reflections on the «third space feminism»; in Adami (2023) on temporal approaches to migration.

³ For example, consider McKeever (2020)’s conceptualization of political exile. He emphasizes the “forced” departure from a country due to one’s political affiliations and/or political engagement.

⁴ Specifically regarding the Tunisian case, Zederman (2018; 2023) has equally outlined the significance of studying the continuum of migrants’ engagement across different temporalities and fields of action.

uted to establishing a connection with my interlocutors. Conversely, these women had faced direct or indirect forms of racism, experiences of visa regimes and revolutionary violence that I never lived myself and for which I ensured to foster a trusting fieldwork environment, with the ethnographic work proving particularly beneficial to this purpose.

The ethnographic phase has equally been crucial in mapping the networks of activism in France and in selecting the core biographies on which this paper is based. I have conducted the majority of these life history interviews in France between 2021 and 2023. Each life history interview lasted on average between two and six hours (see appendix B for a list of the life history interviews employed in this article). The selection of women with whom I have conducted these life history interviews has been guided by two main criteria. First, following Mannheim (1952), we could argue that these women activists belong to the same «political generation» that has been formed as such by sharing common political, cognitive and emotional experiences of political socialisation. They have all been involved or politically socialised in the left-wing space of dissent in Tunisia that had silently survived under Ben Ali (for a list of the organisation where they have been involved see appendix A). Furthermore, they have all participated to the 2010-2011 Tunisian revolutions and, at that time, their age ranged between 17 and 27 years old. Secondly, these women have all left Tunisia after 2011 and they have all taken part in feminist and queer activists' networks, as the empirical section will further explain. In this article, they have all been anonymized and their names have been changed to protect their identities.

The life history interviews have, more specifically, been aimed at directly reconstructing the activists' paths of engagement and their perception on such journey (Della Porta 2014). The life history interviews concentrated on the different stages of these actors' political and intimate paths, encompassing their familial, educational and geographical backgrounds, their experiences of political socialisation under Ben Ali (mostly through friends, family, political organisations, schools and cultural spaces), their memories of the revolution and their educational, working and political experiences in its aftermath, both in Tunisia and throughout their migratory journey. These narrations were also accompanied by questions on their views on the political context across time, their emotional and affective ties in the different stages of their lives and more specific questions on their experiences between leaving Tunisia and re-adjusting to the new country.

To the purpose of the data analysis, I transcribed the interviews verbatim, ensuring that the transcripts used the exact wording employed by the activists (Spradley 1979). I transcribed the interviews in the language they were conducted, which was usually French, and later translated some extracts into English. In the analysis of the transcribed interviews, I first outlined – with the support of a life history calendar – the different phases of activists' engagement, and I have connected them to their affective and emotional linkages to engagement at the time (Freedman *et al.* 1988). To the purpose of this study, in the appendix C, I have identified five main phases of these activists' paths of engagement dividing them in:

- a) political socialisation under Ben Ali;
- b) activism after 2011;
- c) disengagement from (names of organizations for each);
- d) activism after disengagement;
- e) activism after exile. While having intersectional characteristics (coming from different geographical and class backgrounds), they have all maintained similar paths of activism⁵.

Secondly, with the support of MAXQDA, I have employed a thematic analysis of the field notes and the six life history interviews (Ritchie and Spencer 1994), centring them around the following three index:

- a) activists' emotions (hope, disillusion, fatigue, enthusiasm...);
- b) activists' practices within the organizations (hierarchy, debate, sisterhood, self-reflection...);
- c) meanings and interpretations of activists' engagement/reconversion/disengagement.

I have then analysed the data not separately, but within their narrative and the life-stage to which they had been associated (Andrews *et al.* 2008). In the following empirical section, I will therefore focus on the paths of these six women activists, brining attention to their different stages of activism in relation to their subjective interpretations on each phase, their emotive and mnemonic associations, and their practice-oriented experiences across time and space.

4. CONTINUITIES OF ACTIVISM: FROM DISENCHANTMENT TO EXILE

This empirical section shows the paths of engagement of six women activists in Tunisia (sections 4.1 and

⁵ Considering that this information is not relevant to discuss the empirical analysis of this article, I will not specify the intersectional characteristics of each woman in order to further protect their anonymization.

4.2) and after their exile in Europe (section 4.3), showing their processes of continuation of activism and their meanings of engagement. These processes have not happened in a clear-cut separation, but are often overlapping, with a gradual disengagement from one form often leading to a growing political and emotional investment in another. In order to analyse the continuities of activism, it is indeed crucial to focus on how these transitions have unfolded. In particular, I will look at meanings of engagement and forms of “orientations”, to show how individual interests, dispositions and political attitudes have intervened before the moment of joining a new party or organisation, as well as how they have often preceded reconversion. Accordingly, the following sections will show, on the one hand, the continuities that emerged throughout political change and exile; and, on the other, how feminist and queer spaces made such continuities possible offering a space for “multiple identifications”.

4.1. *Disenchantment and Exit*

As extensively documented, the 2010-2011 uprisings have been a transformative event for the Tunisian population, impacting not only longstanding activists but also people who observed these events or took to the streets for their first time. This transformation occurred due to the intensity of these events, but also for the new hopes and utopias that they generated (Bayat 2013). A new young left-wing political generation became significantly involved in this process but soon began to perceive that the older political generations were taking control of the post-revolutionary process. In particular, they felt how these older generations struggled to adapt to the new practices and utopias that have been created through the revolutions (El Waer 2018; Hmed 2018). In the immediate passage from clandestine forms of activism to post-clandestine ones after 2011, these young activists felt indeed how the very meanings of “being engaged” – both as a political and personal experience – had been changed (*Ibidem*).

This resulted in a major phase of exit or disengagement of these activists from the organisations they had been once involved and took place among a variety of political organisations and structures (*Ibidem*). This has especially been registered after the years 2013/2014. On the one hand, the electoral loss of the Left in 2011 and 2014, the assassinations in 2013 of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi (two prominent leaders of the Left), the enduring presence within the governing bodies of public figures closely associated to Ben Ali and the deterioration of the socio-economic conditions are all

potential elements that brought these activists to feeling a detachment from politics (Abdelmoula 2018; El Waer 2018; Hmed 2018). On the other, as mentioned, the life within the organisations themselves was not able to canalise the experiences of these young activists who went through the 2011 revolution. This was especially evident in the strict hierarchical form and the lack of transparency that the historical organisations maintained – even if in different degrees and forms – and that could not meet the more horizontal politics that the revolution opened (*Ibidem*).

In line with these findings, the “exit” observed within the biographies of the six women activists upon which this article is centred was indeed connected to both their fatigue within the functioning of these organizations (as shown in appendix C)⁶ and the broader events unfolding in the country. Alongside these aspects, there were, however, other factors pertaining more specifically to the life within the different organisations, as the six women activists mentioned. Among these, the experiences of sexism in traditional left-wing organizations and the impossibility of having roles of leadership as women are factors that played a crucial role⁷. Another issue raised by some was directed towards the traditional feminist organisations, perceiving them as lacking after 2011 more inclusive definitions of feminism (they equally stressed, however, how this has profoundly changed since then). This included, notably, LGBTQAI+ rights, sex workers’ rights and, more broadly, the new practices and discourses inherited from the revolutions⁸.

4.2. *Towards Feminist Practices*

As observed in the previous section, these six women activists disengaged, after 2013/2014, from the organisations in which they had previously been involved, with the exception of Aziza who left the PCOT soon after 2011. Their engagement was transformed through two main different processes, that saw a combination of previous forms of mobilisation with biographical changes as well as a resignification to engagement itself. On the one hand, after their exit from political organisations, these activists sporadically continued participating in manifestations or following more issue-based causes. This was linked to a form of disenchantment related to the post-2011 outcomes, a personal necessity towards self-reflection and pause from politics and less biographical

⁶ Among these, it should be noted, however, that the experiences within the FTCA and FTCC were narrated as positive and joyful ones.

⁷ For further reflection on this topic see Selmi (2019).

⁸ For further reflection on this topic see Kréfa (2019; 2022).

availability, that in the case of Lina, Aziza, Haifa leaned towards journeys of professionalization (while for Laila it brought to a period of exit from engagement). On the other, those activists who had already been involved in feminist organisations under Ben Ali and its immediate aftermath (as Halima and Reem), found soon new spaces to re-organise in the new feminist and queer collectives and organisations – like Chouf, Chaml and Mawjowdin – that have been created after 2012, as well as in transnational queer and feminist networks.

Following their exit from previous political organisations, some activists started leaning towards more feminist-oriented practices and increased their interest in feminist and queer organisations – while, however, not joining them on a permanent basis (as in the case of Lina, Aziza, Haifa and Laila). In the words of Lina: «The thing that gave me hope again was the queer movement [...] I did some workshops with them and they gave me hope again» (June 2022). She increasingly started detaching from a «patriarchal image of power» and started orienting herself towards civil society and associative spheres, combining them with the queer and feminist cause. However, if Lina (as well Laila and Aziza) found a new form of political hope, for others (as Haifa), this form of engagement kept remaining emotionally separated from the previous forms of activism.

In the cases of Lina, Aziza, Haifa and Halima, this orientation towards feminist practices and queer and feminist organisations was accompanied by paths of professionalization while still in Tunisia. Aziza reflected more specifically on the period in which she started taking distance from political action: «I've withdrawn a bit from political life and everything and I've concentrated on how to earn money and go away and, at the same time, by doing graphics and design, I've realised that my need for artistic practice is fundamental to my life» (June 2022). She equally narrates how it was in this same period that her artistic production started to change. In her words: «I started talking about resistance, struggle, metamorphosis, things like that [...] But I talked about them as a woman, from a feminine position, it became more personal: it was always political but more personal and more feminist» (August 2021). While exiting the PCOT, she started to become more and more interested in feminism: she did not join any specific organisation in a permanent form, but she started following other experiences of feminist and queer activism, increasingly changing not only her artistic practices, but also her meanings of engagement. From believing in «camaraderie» – as in being «comrades» – she started believing in «sisterhood», she told me, and she increasingly

started considering her artistic experience as her form of engagement.

While different experiences lead these activists to come closer, engage or re-engage in feminist or queer organisations and practices, feminism offered for everyone a space of identification. These forms were, however, frequently depicted as «already being there» during their childhood and teenage years through discursive references – such as discussions about «menstruations and women's sexuality». Additionally, they were shaped by the example of mothers, sisters or other women in their lives who consistently encouraged them or who they witnessed fighting their own battles on a daily basis. However, these memories became «feminist» for these women only when they came across the first political spaces where they felt recognised or when they encountered a feminist activist who shared similar perspective on (feminist) engagement. For instance, as Laila (June 2021) recalled:

I had this friend who would always tell me that we're not feminists, even if we believe in women's rights and stuff. And [she told] that feminism doesn't serve all women, and I would be like, yeah, I'm not a feminist, because that was you know, when they give you the wrong definitions of feminism.

By briefly travelling abroad, however, she met a woman «who knew about feminists in every part of the world» and in her enthusiasm for transnational feminist solidarity, Laila found her own form of feminist identification. Moreover, what emerged as common in the experiences of all these women was the possibility of finding a space for «creativity» and invention, a space that could be «brave enough», that had «something to fight for», and that tried to function according to new logics and principles, as those that emerged in 2011. In these spaces, these activists could «experiment» with new forms of activism, merging artistic practices with political ones as well as nurture their personal and self-caring dimensions and intimate connections with others. Furthermore, they could focus on the «importance of practices», rather than on «purely ideological» or «authoritarian» forms of political engagement. This confirms what has been documented in many works that explain, on the meso-level, how the practice-oriented qualities of feminism have helped the sustainment of engagement, whether this was through professionalization (Hasso 2001) or through the continuation of engagement across generations (Whittier 1995).

On the other hand, Reem and Halima, who were already close to or engaged in feminist organisations under Ben Ali's clandestine rule, could instead soon reconvert their capital into other forms of engagement

while still in Tunisia. This passage was smoother thanks to their previous political relationships and to the emerging of numerous feminist and queer associations in 2011, which allowed these activists to find new political spaces while continuing engaging on similar causes⁹. There were also two major additional factors that facilitated this passage. First, as Halima put it, they offered the possibility to «work in the field or, in other words, to take action on a day-to-day basis, to change mentalities and behaviours» (July 2021), conducting workshops and other formative experiences in universities, creating festivals or engaging more directly in the various neighbourhoods of the city. Second, this became possible also thanks to the transnational networks that, already under Ben Ali's period, feminist and queer associations had started to silently build. This was the case of Reem who underlined how building these networks had been addressed to «being recognised as a community», «finding each other» and «recognising each other's needs» and it was especially important for the LGBTQAI+ community that, also through this support, could start creating their first associations (May 2023).

4.3. *Exile and the Continuities of Activism*

The time that followed these processes of individual abeyance, professionalization or reconversion was often combined with the search for new working or students' opportunities abroad – mostly in France, and only in one case in another European country. To the purposes of this analysis I will not enter into further details on these activists' processes of exile, but I would underline how they always happened through the request of study or work permits and never brought to asylum applications. Despite the possibility of political reconversion among the women activists who had previously been engaged in feminist organisation or, for others, their «orientations» towards feminist practices, leaving the country was often linked to a feeling of «having nothing to do anymore» or «something to give». It often included feelings of «marginality» or «rejection», the need for a «right of existence», the perception of «being illegal» and a state of «exile» or «alienation» experienced while being in the country. The sense of «revolutionary loss» was permeating many of these narratives (field notes 2021).

However, compared to the other activists of the same generation who left the country after 2011, as I could observe during my ethnography, these activists could find in the space of arrival forms of engagement

that they saw as in continuity with their previous queer and feminist engagement or orientations (field notes 2021). I argue how this was possible through a «multiple identification» of their cause in the space of arrival, readapting it to the new forms and spaces of action encountered, to one's own biographical trajectory at the time of arrival and to the processes of reconversion that these activists had experienced before leaving the country. While experiences of engagement in exile have indeed been depicted in rupture with previous forms of mobilisation, I instead observed how, in all these cases, forms of political continuities had been deployed in two (possibly overlapping) paths: processes of re-engagement towards «homeland» politics and/or «local forms of engagement» in transnational networks. In continuity with former political utopias and activism experiences, a focus on spaces that could be both creative and horizontal was fundamental in the search for new spaces of engagement. Furthermore, paths of professionalization continued characterising the experiences of Lina, Aziza, Haifa and Halima and, in addition, the one of Reem who, some years after her exile, equally followed paths of professionalization in feminist and queer spaces.

a) «Homeland» Activism

With the exception of Reem, all the activists I encountered have re-engaged in «homeland» politics, referring to those forms of mobilisation towards the place where these activists have lived before their exile. This occurred with varying intensities, as some women activists became more actively involved in the network and continued mobilising until the movement ceased its activities. In contrast, others participated actively only in the initial phases and subsequently remained engaged by taking part in the manifestations organised by the network, maintaining close relationships with its members. This «homeland» engagement found renewed momentum, particularly through the emergence of Falgatna (We're fed up), a feminist anti-capitalist movement created in Tunisia in December 2019, on the wave of the LasTesis' performance «Un violador en tu camino» («A rapist in your way») and anticipated by the AnaZeda campaign («MeToo») that had sparked numerous protests against sexism, gender violence and feminicide in Tunisia (Bint Nadia 2020). At the same time, Falgatna was devoted to experimenting with horizontal and creative political practices and, in doing so, it helped creating a community of feminist engagement from abroad (*Ibidem*).

The collective quickly gained significant popularity but, within a few months, had to face the impact of the initial waves of Covid-19. Nevertheless, it played a pivotal role in establishing and solidifying a Tunisian feminist

⁹ This phenomenon has been usually described by the social movement literature as «spill-over effect» (Corrigall-Brown 2011).

and queer network of activism from abroad. These women activists continued to advocate, manifest and organise against gender violence, linked to forms of police abuse or to cases of feminicide and harassment taking place in Tunisia. This moment was lived by many with a sense of “political reappropriation”, reclaiming a space that had been taken from them. As Lina describes the moment when, while in France, she participated again in a protest: «It had been a long time that I hadn’t done that. It had been years and, there, we were making banners with spray, we were drinking beers, we were choosing the slogans [...] And I hadn’t done that for years, it was extremely nostalgic, I felt so well» (June 2022).

As explained by Kréfa (2019; 2022), the emphasis on «human rights violations», rooted in the surviving spaces of mobilisation active under Ben Ali, has remained central in mobilising feminist and queer movements. In line with her work, I observed that this discursive frame continued mobilising queer and feminist activists abroad, providing them a space to continue their journey of reconversion in queer and feminist activism. Rather than “homeland” politics itself, it was these activists’ interest in feminist and queer causes in Tunisia that led them to re-engage in Tunisian politics. This engagement was facilitated by the emerge of new networks and relationships, and by reactivating, as in the example of Lina, these activists’ prior emotional attachment to the political sphere. For them, the meanings of “homeland” politics were mostly intertwined with the feminist and queer groups where they could rediscover a sense of home and belonging.

b) Local Activism

A second space for feminist and queer mobilisation emerged through local forms of engagement. This encompassed participating in or creating associations focused on migration and women’s rights, within local networks of activism that privileged a transnational and global dimension and, in some cases, this engagement was integrated with the activists’ professional spheres. These forms consistently took on an intersectional dimension, as these activists pointed out at the continuum of their struggles in Tunisia with the violence and racialization of their bodies in the new country of arrival. It has been a significant aspect for those who arrived in France, considering both its enduring colonial legacy with Tunisia and the prevalent racism and Islamophobia experienced by these women in the new environment. Finally, these activists could reinterpret their older political values and beliefs in the light of the feminist and queer practices that they had started to discover and identify with. As Aziza (June 2022) pointed out:

I liked the experience of Falgatna, I was interested in it. But I tried to be more in the international and intersectional [spheres] [...] I want to be in contact with a lot of different nationalities, I don’t want to focus on my relationship with Tunisia, the links with Tunisia, I’m not interested. I feel that while I was in Tunisia, I was an internationalist, and I still am.

She explained, in particular, how passing from her communist views on «internationalism» to «intersectionality» was a more natural declination of her journey of engagement in France. Therefore, while still participating occasionally in forms of “homeland” activism, she prioritized intersectional activism on a local basis. On the other hand, other activists emphasised that, while being active on a local basis, they primarily identified their feminist activism on a global and transnational dimension. This was especially true in cases where feminist and queer activism converged (field notes 2022).

Finally, within these frameworks, paths of professionalization coexisted with the experiences of these activists within intersectional feminist and queer spaces on the local level. In these cases, the meanings of “being engaged” – inherited from their previous experiences in the country – often remained distinct from their engagement within the professional sphere. As Halima underlined: «I feel engaged through my work [...] But I’m not an activist anymore, because for me there’s a difference between being engaged in my work, for which I receive a salary, and being an activist» (July 2021). On the other hand, for others, especially in the cases of Aziza, Lina and Reem who mostly invested in a professional reconversion of their activism, the boundaries between professional and activist experiences remained mostly blurred and, within their personal histories, could mutually sustain each other.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have delved into the political trajectories and meanings of engagement of six women activists throughout the 2010-2011 SWANA revolutions and their subsequent exile. The analysis has explored their connections to political organizations and movements following these eventful times, analysing their experiences within two geographical spaces: Tunisia and another space of exile, that has been France for the majority of the cases here analysed. By combining theoretical and empirical reflections, this article has converged two bodies of the literature that are traditionally studied in isolation: the literature working on women political engagement during revolutionary times

and the one on gendered borders studies. In particular, challenging the extant literature, this study underscores the importance of analysing the continuity of women's political engagement before and after their exile, with an emphasis on their subjective meanings of engagement.

Firstly, in examining the political transformations of these women preceding exile, I have observed how they disengaged from more historically rooted political organisations to lean towards feminist-oriented practices and feminist and queer organisations. This shift occurred through various means, involving, on the one hand, forms of orientations for those activists who had not previously been involved in feminist organization and who did not directly fully re-engage in political activism. And on the other, this transformation happened through a more direct reconversion in the case of those activists who, politically socialised in feminist organisations, preferred to engage in horizontal structures, aligning more closely with the newly inherited revolutionary practices. In some cases, these paths also intersected with processes of professionalization.

Secondly, when analysing continuities in the trajectories of these women activists after exile, I showed how queer and feminist activism provided them a space for a “multiple identifications” of their meanings of engagement. Whether they were involved in “homeland” politics or local initiatives, the earlier processes of reconversion or orientation indeed facilitated their exploration of spaces for engagement once in exile. Furthermore, in line with their political experiences during the revolution, this occurred through the search for horizontal and creative practices.

In this way, while aligning with the existing literature that examines the sustainment of feminist engagement at the meso-level, this study has equally highlighted the continuities of feminist engagement by directing the attention to the micro-level of analysis. Furthermore, it has explored how a focus on the continuities of activism can offer new insights not only into how political engagement is sustained on the micro-level across temporalities and geographies but also, more broadly, on the processes through which the “gendered order” is maintained, negotiated or re-adjusted across women's experiences and their interpretations of engagement. However, while the strengths of this study lie in its in-depth explorations on the paths and meanings of engagement of these women, further analyses can enhance a more comprehensive understanding of the relations between political engagement and the “gendered order”. For instance, comparing the experiences of these women with the political paths of men of their same political generation or focussing on these women's shifting posi-

tionalties across time and space could provide new valuable insights on this topic.

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APPENDIX

*A: Organisations of Ben Ali's left-wing space of dissent (a selection)*¹⁰

Type of structure	Name of organisations
Cultural spaces	FTCA (<i>Fédération Tunisienne des Cinéastes Amateurs</i>); FTCC (<i>Fédération Tunisienne des Ciné-Clubs</i>)
Trade unions	UGTT (<i>Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail</i>); UGET (<i>Union Générale des Etudiants de Tunisie</i>) active in universities
Association for women's rights	ATFD (<i>Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates</i>)
Political parties and organizations	PCOT (<i>Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de Tunisie</i>); <i>Watad</i> (before 2011) converged in the Democratic Patriots' Unified Party (after 2011)

B: List of interviews

- a) Lina, life history interview, June 2022, France
- b) Aziza, life history interviews, August 2021 and June 2022, France
- c) Reem, life history interview, May 2023, online
- d) Haifa, life history interview, July 2021, France
- e) Halima, life history interview, July 2021, France
- f) Laila, life history interview, June 2021, France

C: Political trajectories of the six women activists

Activists	Political socialisation (Ben Ali)	Activism (after 2011)	Disengagement from	Activism after disengagement	Activism after exile
a) Lina	FTCA FTCC UGET	FTCA FTCC UGET	UGET	Mawjowdin Professionalization	Falгатna Professionalization
b) Aziza	PCOT	PCOT	PCOT	ATFD Professionalization	Falгатna Intersectional networks (local) Professionalization
c) Reem	ATFD FTCC	Chouf and feminist transnational networks	ATFD	Chouf and feminist transnational networks	Exit from Chouf Transnational networks/Global activism Professionalization
d) Haifa	Watad	Democratic Patriots	Democratic Patriots	Professionalization (orientation) Mawjowdin	Falгатna Intersectional networks (local) Professionalization
e) Halima	ATFD	UGET PCOT Mawjowdin	PCOT UGET	Professionalization	Falгатna Professionalization
f) Laila	Street politics	Street politics	Street politics	Chaml and ATFD (orientation)	Falгатna Intersectional networks (local)

¹⁰ This list does not encompass the entirety of the left-wing dissident space under Ben Ali, but rather focuses on the organizations in which the six women activists have been engaged. For further references on the spaces of dissent active under Ben Ali consider Ayari (2016) and Zederman (2018).