

# Traditional and new forms of young women's political engagement in a transitional context

TUNISIA AS EXAMPLE



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# **Traditional and new forms of young women's political engagement in a transitional context**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Project: Young Women and Political Participation: Institutional and Informal Mobilization Paving the Way to Future Actions**

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# Introduction

Following the liberation of the political participation sphere brought by the “January 14 Revolution”, interests were revived for research on politics and relationships between co-citizens, particularly youth which had been for long perceived to be apolitical, shut away in their private sphere. The Tunisian Revolution has indeed changed society’s perception on youth not willing to engage in politics, as it showed that they were actually interested but differently. The Authoritarian regime of Ben Ali affected political engagement by increasing its repercussions (risks taken by engaging in protest movements), and by implying rejection of politics. The change witnessed since the Revolution in the structure of political opportunities (new context of democratic transition) has to some degree increased participation opportunities.

Did youth political participation increased after the revolution? Do they prefer other outlines of participation/engagement to party support? Do their political practices and perception of politics reflect any crisis in the representation system?

This study was realized in the framework of the project “Young women and public participation: institutional and informal mobilization paving the way to future actions” initiated by the Centre of Arab women for training and research -CAWTAR- and financed by the International development research centre -IDRC-. In this study we attempt to answer some of these issues by focusing on a special category: Women.

Our focus in this study is specifically young women regarding the persistent poor representation of women in politics and chiefly young women’s representation.

# Hypothesis

Our preliminary observations led us to develop a hypothesis suggesting that young women do not engage in politics in spite of higher educational skills and the contraction of engagement risks, due to their negative perception of politics and mainly about representative democracy.

The fact that young people rather fall back on associations’ programs and activities or on occasional protests instead of voting or joining party structures seems to be due to two factors: age and the nature of political offer. The purpose is then to explore the extent to which the transitional context has reconciled youth with politics after 23 years of authoritarianism (party in power prevailing over the political space, which in addition was selective, satellite political parties, political forums highly controlled by the State, etc.).

The negative vision of the political system in general, and more specifically of representational democracy, defines the form of political participation. The nature of political offer (democratic transition vs. authoritarianism is but one of several other factors contributing to the negative vision held about politics. It would therefore be necessary to inter-connect: a) contextual effects (macro-level), b) the social and cultural properties of social actors and their differentiated socializations and social experiences (micro level); c)

the political organization or actual community (meso level) to determine differences in terms of forms of political engagement.

Our second basic hypothesis is that the type of young women’s participation is distinct and has its own characteristics making it different from the political participation of young men. Characteristics relate to both the type of participation and the engagement rate. In terms of participation, the purpose is to know to which extent the gender identity and the gendered socialization, involving representations from the political/militant spheres based on male/female opposition, contribute to shaping women’s militant practices and guide their engagements. Concerning the engagement rate, it will relate to the way women mobilize their resources and develop capitalization strategies to evolve in a given political space taking in consideration obstacles facing them as women. This also includes exploring their rapport with rewards favoring sustainable engagement.

# Methodology

- Forty-one detailed interviews were conducted with a diverse panel of women and men<sup>1</sup>, enabling us to explore the contrasted relations that politically active men and women have towards politics as well as between politically active young women and older women.

- Four focus groups have also been organized: two focus groups were devoted to cyber-activism.

The participants of the first focus-group were women cyber-activists and women active in the traditional sphere. The session aimed at defining this practice compared to participation in political parties or with CSOs. The second brought together men and women cyber-activists and was organized one year after the first one<sup>2</sup>; it tried to track the development of this practice one year after the Revolution and to investigate gender-based discrimination in this domain. The third focus group explored men-women relationships in party structures, while the fourth examined senior-junior relations, and particularly the transmission of know-how and of inter-generational political know-how.

- The observation of the performance of 12 cyber-activists<sup>3</sup> on Facebook, selected based on their notoriety (not mediatic only) and the diversity of their profiles has enriched our corpus. Observation focused on onsite debates, and on internet users’ comments on cyber-activists’ publications and statutes in order to better understand the evolution of cyber-activism’s challenges and relations between various stakeholders.

- In addition, we monitored and analyzed conversations and publications on Facebook<sup>4</sup> related to political women and we watched some women’s personal Facebook accounts and pages.

<sup>1</sup> We decided to assign pseudonyms to our responders in order to preserve their anonymity. We kept pseudonyms already chosen by interviewed cyber-activists only when we believe that they are known and may reveal responders’ identities.

<sup>2</sup> i.e. one year after the January 14, 2011 Revolution.

<sup>3</sup> They are 6 ladies (Bent Trad, Henda Hendoud, Fatma Arabicca, Jolanare Jo, Massir Destin, AmiraYahyaoui) and 6 men (Z, Azizi Amami, Hamdi Kaloutcha, Big Trap Boy, Kerim Bouzouita et Chut Libre).

<sup>4</sup> We deliberately chose Facebook from a range of other tools available because of its popularity in Tunisia compared to other tools (Twitter, blogs, etc...). We were able to note in this regard that even the most prominent cyber-activists tend to favor this tool.

# Results of the study

## Emergence of a new form of political participation : Cyberactivism and citizen activism

This study address conditions required for the emergence of militant practices, which seem to mark youth's disappointment of politics. By comparing it to conventional politics, we have tried to highlight features characterizing this form of participation (individualism, freedom of expression, deliverance from submission to hierarchy, subversion, loss of interest).

Our analysis shows that cyber-activists' practices relate to militant activism and not to politics. It is characterized by resentment towards political parties' quest for legitimate political authority, and calling for "activism for the sake of activism" and hence the constitution of "counter-powers"<sup>5</sup>. Cyber-activism constitutes a change in the common logic of activism. If we replicate renewal in religious beliefs to politics, we will notice that transformations are quite similar. As the emergence of "customized" religiosities reflects liberation from communities we belong to<sup>6</sup>, cyber-activism is also a customized engagement, where "individuals are involved and even elevated"<sup>7</sup>. Our survey shows that the choice for cyber-activism responds to an ethical need for freedom, and the desire to get rid of hierarchy characterizing party structures. Cyberactivism is indeed characterized by the absence of hierarchy preventing the development of activists' personal development. This type of activism preserves individual autonomy.

The changing perception about politics contributes to the challenge now facing participatory democracy. There are calls to implement participatory democracy in Tunisia, still confined to some initiatives, such as *OpenGov*, faced by the resistance of the elected members of the National Constitutional Assembly in trying to enforce transparency, or the *Bawsala Association (Compass)*, prevented to attend the Assembly's sessions when it started denouncing the representatives' absenteeism.

While we are not about to find a solution to this crisis, it seems essential for us to launch a debate about the problem. Other democratic models have been able to go around verticality problems or the exclusion of laymen from power, but they still have other problems to go through. Participatory experiences in many countries, mainly in France, have shown that the exclusion of laymen still persists and constitutes a particularly tough problem facing representative democracy<sup>8</sup>.

In analyzing the evolution of post-revolution cyber-activism, we see that laymen are once again excluded from public debate. Ordinary citizens do participate, but their participation is limited to expressing their thoughts, guided by opinion leaders certainly "uninterested" but well informed.

<sup>5</sup> Cécile Péchu «Les générations militantes à droit au logement», *Revue française de science politique*, 1/2001 (Vol. 51), p. 73-103.

<sup>6</sup> Frédéric Lenoir, *Les métamorphoses de Dieu. Des intégrismes aux nouvelles spiritualités*, Paris, Plon, 2003,

<sup>7</sup> Jaques Ion, «Interventions sociales, engagement bénévoles et mobilisation des expériences personnelles», in Jacques Ion and Michel Peroni, *Engagement public et exposition de la personne*, La Tour d'Aigues, Ed. de L'aube, 1997, p.81.

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Neveu (Dir.), *Cultures et pratiques participatives : perspectives comparatives*, Paris, L'Harmattan, Collection Logiques Politiques, 2007.

Doesn't this constitute an elite-mass separation confirming the dispossession of laymen by political professionals?

## Distinct modes for political engagement / activism: conventional participation and cyber-activism

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze different modalities used by young women to engage in politics, by studying both the trajectories of women activists in traditional participation structures and experiences of women cyber-activists. Therefore, we analyzed both engagement predisposition systems, and when, why and how predispositions are actually translated in women activists' effective engagement.

We highlighted modalities for the transmission or formation of predispositions to engagement. Is the difference between women choosing conventional engagement and others resorting to cyber-activism due to distinct predispositions, yielded by different socialization and subjectivization processes? Taking in account the fact that we are specifically interested in this study in young women, it would be worthy to explore the impact of gender and age-based socializations on predispositions for political and active engagement, and the different forms of engagements.

Engaging in activism is not only favored by the political socialization and the explicit transmission of beliefs, ideologies and the ways to be and to do. In the absence of inherited resources that can be mobilized in the political/militant sphere, responders have put together resources acquired and constructed in the framework of considerable experiences. Political culture in particular is usually acquired in an independent way, under the influence of a classmate or a teacher, in the framework of democratic participation experiments abroad, or by taking part in political competitions at the University.

The interpretation made by responders about their experiences (injustice, political or social exclusion) reflects a subjectivization process whereby militant engagement is seen as a self-construction process and where own rules are designed to be able to resist to various powers: Family, Society or the State.

In this regard, gender-based socialization seems to be a fundamental element in creating desire for militant engagement. As we will see in the following chapter, socialization considerably affects militant careers, and consequently modifies the notion of reward and militant strategies.

Analysis of the differences in political engagement processes between different generations clearly shows the impact of the political context on commitment probabilities. Cases of interviewees engaged during the sixties and the seventies demonstrate the role of revolutionary ideologies as a generation marker and the social valorization of militant engagement and risk taking.

Stories told by responders having engaged after the revolution about political life in Tunisia under Ben Ali differ from stories told by activists engaged in the sixties and the seventies. Political life is said to have been empty, meaningless, and militant engagement would be absurd. In addition to parents' discouragement to engage in politics due to related risks and dangers, several responders allude to the absurdity of engagement that they consider useless in a context where "nothing happens", and where it would be ineffective to militate.

## Resilience to maintain militant engagement: conditions for the success and failure of young women's militant careers

Understanding ways to maintain militant investments constitutes a crucial issue for engagement sociologists. Several mechanisms have been identified by studies exploring militants' engagements: access to militant, social or cultural capital, access to power positions, satisfaction of fulfilling duties, excitement about collective action and risk taking, group solidarity, attachment to a group or to a person, and lateral contracted challenges that would prevent disengagement even in the case of serious ideological disagreements. The reinforcement of militant investments can also be through identification to a role or to a mentor or the product of skill selection and appointment mechanisms used by political groups.

In this regard, we explored mechanisms enabling militant women to be taken in consideration with regard to the high price of activism. What can lead a woman activist, either member of a party or a cyber-activist, to quit or to convert her activism?

### 1. Rewards of militantism

Access to knowledge and know-how is not considered to be a reward by most responders. Activism is less seen as a way to reinforce skills attributing a social value to women activists than a means to practice knowledge and competences through field work offered by activism. From this perspective, recognition of this contribution by the militant organization replaces loyalty toward this structure.

Our survey has shown that the main reason behind for this attitude is confusion between political skills and school or professional skills. This confusion is not specific to the Tunisian political class. Several factors can be employed to explain responders' different perceptions about this type of rewards:

- First, women activists' social origin: most responders either come from middle to upper middle class, with an institutionalized or objectified cultural capital, or represent class emigrants, who were part of the popular class but have been able to acquire an institutionalized cultural capital thanks to education. Therefore, they don't look at the party or The CSOs as a structure offering post-school socialization. Their educational knowledge and professional know-how are put at the service of the party or the association;
- Second, the engagement timeframe: The responders' age when they engage in political structures reflecting their school achievements seems to be a fundamental variable in their relation with learning and their perception on the accumulation of cultural capital as a reward for their activism. The study highlighted the importance of the engagement timeframe in the definition of a special relation with some type of rewards, cultural in our case, particularly when social actors lack inherited cultural resources;
- Third, the transformation of the political context where militant engagement is taking place : we noted a decreasing interest in ideological production which was one of the most important rewards for the 1960-1980 activism. The ideological bursting and the removal of borders between ideologies (among the large number of political parties, two poles have preserved very clear ideologies: the extreme left and Islamists) constitute major factors. To us, it is mainly the urgency of this transition phase and the electoral competition logic that led to this transformation. The

challenge is now to rely on political staff that is able to convince heterogeneous populations in the social and cultural spheres, when a large part of this population is uninterested and not concerned by ideological arguments.

### 2. Holding a permanent position at the party and women's biographic availability

The issue of conciliation between the public and private lives for politically engaged women has become a fact. The preservation of militant engagements is often made at the expense of other professional, affective and family spheres. The professionalization of activism reduces constraints related to engagement in terms of financial budget and time, two vital and decisive resources to preserve militant investments. Yet, most responders reject the idea of political professionalization and prefer a more idealistic form of activism "active participation, absence of salary, not mainly geared toward financial profit, generally presented as exemplary because its intensity reflects the value and importance given to the organization's activities."<sup>9</sup>

One of the most remarkable elements in the Tunisian political life is the scarcity of full time positions in parties, considered to contrast with the principle of activism based on self sacrifice. The traumatism generated by Ben Ali's venal State certainly plays a role, but for us it's mainly the confinement of the opposition in a state of economic and political precariousness that has kept parties in an adverse position. The social valorization of the logic of disinterested activism leads to the denial of this type of reward for activism.

### 3. Women's public speaking and decision making

The acquisition of purely political or cultural knowledge and know-how seems for most responders secondary compared to access to public speaking and decision making, which can be made possible through engagement, and which represent the most appreciated form of reward, and therefore constitute an important incentive for activism.

Public speaking is almost lived as the time to exhibit potential, a self-assertion time or an experience enabling the speaker to impose herself in a universe considered to be exclusive for men, where the chance for women to be seriously heard by peers is smaller. Nevertheless, all responders without exception mentioned difficulties as women for their speaking to be recognized by their peer male party fellows. Women must hold exceptional skills to be able to find their way, while it would be enough for men just to exist. Responders are usually well aware of their skills and think they've got nothing to envy men for. Obstacles standing against public speaking and decision making as identified by our responders relate more to gender and youth. The public speaking right is generally easily granted to men and not to women. On the other hand, the weight of pressures women usually bear often leads to their exclusion from decision making spheres.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lagroye, *Sociologie politique*, Paris, PFNSP & Dalloz, 2002, p. 244.

#### 4. Recognizing women's public speaking in politics through the prism of media visibility

Obstacles preventing public speaking and decision making have a direct impact on women engaged in politics. Media monitoring shows that Tunisian women politicians suffer from a lack of visibility in both conventional and social media; their image is affected by gender stereotypes acting on the recognition of their political status. Such invisibility is generally interpreted as a form of discrimination due to the exclusion of political women by media professionals from the media scene. However, reasons lying behind this fact are much more complex and are partly due to women politicians themselves. The analysis of the media visibility of women politicians enabled us to better examine its relation with recognition. It reflects the absence of women politicians' awareness about the importance of media visibility and strategies. Does the search for recognition mean open requests for recognition and visibility? Not necessarily. Does the denial for recognition that we studied through sexist slander result in the development of visibility strategies to overcome obstacles? The answer is no. This analysis raises fundamental questions: Can we talk about denied recognition when recognition is not even claimed? In other terms, can we talk about injustice when the situation, i.e. invisibility, is not always considered to be unfair and does not induce collective actions against unfairness? Afflicted in their search for recognition by gender-based discriminations, do women militants resort to field work and to the people in order to find recognition that is denied to them elsewhere, or is this feature specific to women, replicating in their activism roles that are socially assigned to women: listening and serving others?

#### 5. Mentorship

The study of mentorship relations has shown the importance in some cases of this relation in action-taking and in imposing militant vocations. However, we noticed the quasi-absence of this type of relations, both in conventional and cyber-activism. The mentor character is replaced by other profiles as important as cyber-activists. And which influence is mainly operated through the transmission of values than that of know-how.

## Recommendations

The loss of interest on the part of youth in conventional politics reflected in the emergence of new practices such as cyber-activism, constitutes a plea to reconsider the political configuration in Tunisia, especially that the democratic transition now going on represents the best framework to perform this operation.

**While cyber-activism does not have to comply with the politico politician logic which it actually rejects, it brings to light dysfunctions characterizing conventional participation structures:**

- A very rigid hierarchy and a horizontal construction excluding youth from decision making spheres: it is therefore necessary to conduct advocacy campaigns with political parties and labor unions to soften this hierarchy and put youth forward;

- Work on implementing participatory democracy, and the adoption of measures such as accountability and transparency in political structures has become a requirement as they would reduce the gap between politicians and citizens.

**The gender-based socialization contributes to the constitution of political representations and social roles transposed on the political sphere, which accounts for women's self-exclusion from decision making positions and media visibility.** Therefore, it is necessary to act from childhood in order to establish the culture of equality and participation.

- The importance of sensitizing youth about family environments based on equality and cooperation between couples, which tend to be more united when choices are freely made by men and women.
- Raise awareness about gender equality from early childhood, through sensitization campaigns targeting parents, and integration in school civic education manuals of modules dealing with gender equality;
- Implement within parties criteria for access to decision making based on merit and not on masculinity;
- Raise the awareness of political women about the importance of media visibility and increase the number of training sessions on political communication, mainly strategies to overcome gender-based discrimination (libeling, sexist slander, etc.);
- Train militant women, cyber-activists or activists in parties and unions about advocacy and communication techniques to help in integrating women's rights on the public debate's list of priorities;

The importance of biographic availability in engagement: the age of youth is particularly suitable for political / militant engagement due to time availability. However, marriage and the birth of children slow down engagement as they complicate the balance between private and public lives. In this framework, sharing responsibilities in the couple would be required to overcome this type of obstacles.

**Maintain the parity principle on electoral lists in forthcoming elections.** This positive discrimination initiative largely contributed to the emergence of political vocations among initially depoliticized women. Nonetheless, a thorough study needs to be conducted to ensure that this choice does not lead to stigmatizing women selected for just being women and not due to their competence.

**The importance of transmitting political *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être* to preserve militant engagements.** In the framework of this project, our hypothesis was that this modality would contribute to strengthening engagements. As we observed dysfunctions at the level of relations between generations, and noted that communication problems between the young female militant and the person she identified to be her model would lead to disengagement or militant reconversion, we have put in place a training program aimed at reinforcing and facilitating the sharing of political knowledge and know-how between generations. This experience should be further replicated.



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