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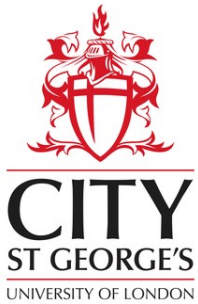
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The Making of Women's Security in Tunisia, 1987–2021: The Role of Epistemic Communities of Practice



Malak Azer

A thesis submitted to the Department of International Politics of City St George's, University of London, for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy*

London, April 2026

Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how Tunisian women's organisations contributed to the production of women's security across two critical periods: the authoritarian era under President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011), and the transitional decade following the 2011 uprising. It argues that certain women's organisations, such as *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* (ATFD), *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement* (AFTURD), and *Aswat Nissa*, although unmistakably civil society organisations, simultaneously functioned as epistemic communities – producing policy-relevant knowledge, setting standards, drafting language, and brokering expertise into state and international arenas.

To capture when these Tunisian women's organisations operated not only individually as sources of expertise, but also as collaborative, adaptive, and practicebased knowledge networks, this study further develops the notion of epistemic communities of practice (CoPs), drawing on epistemic communities theory and the CoPs literature. Following and extending recent work by Adler and Faubert (2022), these are defined as larger constellations anchored by one or more epistemic communities, operating through shared practices and collaborative learning processes in pursuit of normative and policy change. My thesis applies and empirically elaborates this conceptual synthesis in the Tunisian context, highlighting how women's organisations engaged in sustained, strategic knowledge production, shaping Tunisia's legal, political, and social frameworks around women's security through practices that were relational, adaptive, and politically contested. In the post-2011 analysis, I also postulate and trace a concrete instantiation of this form – the Women's Security Epistemic Community of Practice (WSECoP) – anchored by ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa and supported by smaller allied groups.

The study makes several core contributions: it extends epistemic communities theory into non-Western, transitional, and comparative contexts; it identifies and empirically substantiates a specific Tunisian case of an epistemic CoP, the WSECoP; it provides the first systematic analysis of Tunisian women's organisations as epistemic communities; and it bridges empirical richness with theoretical innovation. Whilst grounded in an empirical, case-centred research design, the thesis offers broader insights into epistemic agency, knowledge production, and the role of non-state actors in authoritarian and post-authoritarian settings.

In highlighting how Tunisian women's organisations co-produced knowledge, contested political hierarchies, and influenced women's security nationally and transnationally, the thesis foregrounds their epistemic labour, offering a distinctive framework for understanding their praxis in conditions of both repression and democratic opportunity, with broader implications for the study of knowledge-power, gender politics, and women's security in the Global South. It also challenges conventional dichotomies between civil society and state, or feminist and Islamist, advancing a more nuanced understanding of women's agency and security in Tunisia.

Table of Contents

THESIS INTRODUCTION 10
THE RELEVANCE AND URGENCY OF STUDYING WOMEN'S SECURITY IN TUNISIA .....
10 OVERVIEW AND ARGUMENT .....
14 THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL POSITIONING .....
21

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS 21
EMPIRICAL FOUNDATIONS: STUDIES ON TUNISIAN WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS 27

KEY ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS 29
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY .....
31 CLARIFYING ANALYTICAL BOUNDARIES AND CONCEPTUAL LANGUAGE ..
39 THESIS STRUCTURE .....
42 CHAPTER 1: REVIEWING EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE
..... 45 1.1
INTRODUCTION 45 1.2
WAVE ONE: CONSTRUCTIVIST ORIGINS – RUGGIE AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES ..... 47 1.3 WAVE TWO: HAAS' POSITIVIST REFORMULATION AND CONSOLIDATION
..... 49

1.3.1 WAVE THREE: CRITICAL REVISIONS AND CHALLENGES TO HAAS 52

1.4 WAVE FOUR: EMPIRICAL APPLICATIONS IN SECURITY AND SSR 54

1.4.1 EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES AND SSR 54

1.5 A THEORETICAL TYPOLOGY OF EPISTEMIC COPS 58

1.5.1 THE COPS LITERATURE 62

1.6 CONCLUSION .....
66 CHAPTER 2: STATE FEMINISM AND AUTHORITARIAN UPGRADING UNDER BEN ALI .....
68 2.1 INTRODUCTION .....
68 2.2 MECHANISMS OF AUTHORITARIAN UPGRADING UNDER BEN ALI .....
70

2.2.1 PRESIDENTIAL HYPER-CENTRALISATION AND TECHNOCRATIC RULE 71
2.2.2 THE RCD AS PARTY-STATE INFRASTRUCTURE 72
2.2.3 SECURITY APPARATUS AND SURVEILLANCE STATE 72
2.2.4 KINSHIP NETWORKS, ECONOMIC PRIVILEGE, AND AUTHORITARIAN LIBERALISM 73
2.2.5 THE MANAGEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND ASSOCIATIONAL PLURALISM 74
2.2.6 INTERNATIONAL LEGITIMACY AND REFORMIST BRANDING 75

2.3 DEFINITIONALLY SITUATING 'STATE FEMINISM' 76
2.4 THE BIRTH OF STATE FEMINISM IN BOURGUIBIST TUNISIA 78

2.5 'UPGRADING' AUTHORITARIANISM UNDER BEN ALI: STATE FEMINISM AS AN AUTHORITARIAN STRATEGY 80

2.5.1 ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM AND THE 1990S: THE CONTEXT CONFIGURING THE BENALIST STATE'S

Early Exploitation of Strategy Towards Women 81
2.5.2 Instituting State Feminism in Ben Ali's Tunisia 85

2.6 THE FALL OF BEN ALI: AUTHORITARIAN UPGRADING IN COLLAPSE 92
2.7 CONCLUSION .....
93 PART A .....
96 CHAPTER 3: THE STATE AND UNFT – AN (ASYMMETRIC) EPISTEMIC COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE 97
3.1 INTRODUCTION 97
3.2 UNFT AND STATE FEMINISM IN BEN ALI'S TUNISIA 100

3.2.1 UNFT's connection to (and autonomy from) the state 101
3.2.2 UNFT as an epistemic community 105
3.2.3 UNFT and the Benalist State as an Epistemic CoP 107

3.3 UNFT, 'TUNISIANITÉ', AND 'LA FEMME TUNISIENNE' 112

3.3.1 UNFT within the epistemic CoP 112
3.3.2 UNFT's international activities and policy implementation within the CoP 122

3.4 CONCLUSION .....
128 CHAPTER 4: ATFD, AFTURD, AND WOMEN'S PHYSICAL AND ECONOMIC SECURITY UNDER BEN ALI .....
130 4.1 INTRODUCTION .....
130 4.2 ATFD AND AFTURD'S HISTORY 133

4.2.1 ATFD and AFTURD as epistemic communities 135 **4.3**

GBV IN TUNISIA 138

4.3.1 ATFD Shaping the Agenda and Producing Authoritative Knowledge on GBV within Tunisia 139
4.3.2 ATFD Shaping the Agenda and Producing Authoritative Knowledge on GBV Regionally and Internationally 145
4.3.3 AFTURD Shaping the Agenda and Producing Authoritative Knowledge on GBV Regionally and Internationally 148

4.4 THE INDEPENDENT FEMINIST ORGANISATIONS AND WOMEN'S RIGHT TO EQUAL INHERITANCE 151

4.4.1 ATFD's regional norm-setting and policy advocacy for equal inheritance rights 153
4.4.2 ATFD and AFTURD's domestic and regional norm-setting and policy advocacy for equal inheritance rights 160

4.5 CONCLUSION .....
165 PART B .....
168 CHAPTER 5: THE WSECOP, WOMEN'S SECURITY, AND TUNISIA'S 2011 UPRISING .....
169 5.1 INTRODUCTION .....
169

5.2 POST-2011 WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS IN TUNISIA: THEMES AND PERSPECTIVES FROM THE LITERATURE 173

5.2.1 Beyond Advocacy: Women's Organisations as an Epistemic CoP in post-2011 Tunisia .. 175

5.3 THE WSECOP'S ROLE IN THE 2011 UPRISING: RESHAPING TUNISIA'S POLITICAL AND SOCIAL NARRATIVES 176

5.4 FROM POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION TO CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM: THE AGENDA-SETTING AND PEDAGOGICAL INFLUENCE OF THE WSECOP IN TUNISIA'S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION 181

5.5 TUNISIA'S NATIONAL CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY: THE LIMITS AND CONTRADICTIONS 190

5.5.1 Gender Parity: Obstacles to Full Realisation 191

5.5.2 Navigating Tensions: The WSECoP's Response to a Polarised Political Landscape 192

5.6 CONCLUSION .....

195 CHAPTER 6: THE WSECOP AND TUNISIA'S CONSTITUTION DRAFTING .....

198 6.1 INTRODUCTION .....

198

6.2 BACKGROUND: THE DRAFTING OF TUNISIA'S CONSTITUTION: CONSENSUS-BUILDING, CONTESTATION, AND CIVIL SOCIETY'S CRITICAL ROLE .....

200

6.2.1 The National Constituent Assembly (NCA): A Divided Foundation 201

6.2.2 Mechanisms for Consensus-Building 203

6.2.3 Civil Society as the Engine of Constitutional Progress 203

6.3 THE WSECOP'S ROLE IN SAFEGUARDING THE CONSTITUTIONAL PROCESS 204

6.3.1 Fostering Civic Engagement and Knowledge Exchange 204

6.3.2 Keeping the Constitutional Process Accountable 215

6.4 AFTER STATE FEMINISM: RECONFIGURING RELATIONS IN TRANSITIONAL TUNISIA ..... 225 6.5 CONCLUSION 229

CHAPTER 7: WOMEN'S PHYSICAL SECURITY IN FOCUS: THE WSECOP AND GBV IN POST-2014 TUNISIA 231

7.1 INTRODUCTION 231

7.2 THE WSECOP AND GBV 235

7.2.1 The WSECoP's Policy Advocacy and Reform Facilitation 235

7.2.2 The WSECoP as a Norm Entrepreneur 246

7.2.3 Mediating and Negotiating International Frameworks 253

7.3 CONCLUSION ..... 270 CHAPTER 8: WOMEN'S ECONOMIC SECURITY IN FOCUS: THE WSECOP AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN POST-2014 TUNISIA ..... 273 8.1 INTRODUCTION ..... 273 8.2 THE WSECOP AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC SECURITY 275

8.2.1 The WSECoP as a Norm Entrepreneur 275

8.2.2 The WSECoP's Policy Advocacy and Reform Facilitation 291

8.3 THE WSECOP AND EQUAL INHERITANCE 296

8.3.1 'After State Feminism' and Tunisia's Inheritance Equality Debate 300

8.3.2 The Current State of the Inheritance Equality Debate 304

8.4 THE WSECOP FRAMEWORK'S ENDURING RELEVANCE ..... 305 8.5 CONCLUSION ..... 308 THESIS CONCLUSION ..... 311 REAFFIRMING THE ARGUMENT: WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS AS EPISTEMIC COMMUNITIES IN TUNISIA ..... 311 SUMMARY OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS ..... 313 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS ..... 315 WIDER IMPLICATIONS 320

Implications for Research on Epistemic Communities and CoPs 320

Implications for Studying Tunisian Women's Organisations 321

FINAL REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH ..... 323 APPENDICES ..... 326 TABLE 1: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES ..... 326 TABLE 2: KEY FEMINIST TUNISIAN WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS ..... 328 TABLE 3: KEY POLITICAL PARTIES IN TUNISIA 2011 ONWARDS ..... 329 FIGURE 1: TIMELINE OF KEY POLITICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL EVENTS IN TUNISIA (2011 – 2021) ..... 331 INTRODUCTION: TABLE A1 ..... 335 INTRODUCTION: FIGURE A1 ..... 336 CHAPTER 1: TABLE A2 ..... 337 CHAPTER 1: TABLE A3 ..... 338 CHAPTER 2: FIGURE A2 ..... 340 CHAPTER 2: TABLE A4 ..... 341 CHAPTER 3: FIGURE A3 ..... 342 CHAPTER 4: TABLE A5 ..... 343 CHAPTER 5: TABLE A6 ..... 345 CHAPTER 6: TABLE A7 ..... 346 CHAPTER 7: TABLE A8 ..... 348 CHAPTER 8: TABLE A9 ..... 349 REFERENCES 352

Abbreviations

-AFTURD: Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement; Tunisian Association of Women for Research and Development
-ARP: Assembly of the Representatives of the People of Tunisia
-ATFD: Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates; Tunisian Association of Democratic Women
-BMENA: Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative
-CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
-CEOFVV: Listening and Orientation Centre for Women Victims of Violence
-CME-95: Le Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité
-CoPs: Communities of Practice
-COSPE: Cooperation for the Development of Emerging Countries
-CREDIF: Centre for Research, Documentation, and Information on Women
-CSO: Civil Society Organisation
-CSP: Code de statut personnel; Code of Personal Status
-DCAF: Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance
-DF: Dynamique Féministe
-EMP: Euro-Mediterranean Partnership
-EU: European Union
-FIDH: Fédération internationale pour les droits humains; International Federation for Human Rights
-GBV: Gender-Based Violence
-IR: International Relations
-JSC: Jendouba Solidarity Centre
-LTDH: Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme; Tunisian Human Rights League
-LTWV: League of Tunisian Women Voters
-MEPI: Middle East Partnership Initiative
-MENA: Middle East and North Africa
-MFFES: Tunisia's Ministry of Family, Women, Children, and Seniors

-MTI: Islamic Tendency Movement
-NAP: National Action Plan
-NCA: National Constituent Assembly
-ONFP: Office Nationale de la Famille et de la Population; National Board for Family and Population
-PDP: Democratic Progressive Party
-PSD: Parti Socialiste Destourien; Socialist Destourian Party
-RCD: Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique; Democratic Constitutional Rally
-SSR: Security Sector Reform
-UGTT: Union Générale tunisienne du travail; General Union of Tunisian Workers
-UN: United Nations
-UNFT: Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne; National Union of Tunisian Women
-U.S.: United States
-UTICA: Union tunisienne de l'industrie, du commerce, et de l'artisanat; Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts
-WPA: Women's Political Academy
-WPS: Women, Peace, and Security
-WSECoP: Women's Security Epistemic Community of Practice

Thesis Introduction

The Relevance and Urgency of Studying Women's Security in Tunisia

This thesis asks what it means to speak of women's security amidst authoritarian governance, political rupture, and uneven democratic transitions. Who produces authoritative knowledge about women's security, and to what ends? Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Western and regional discourse alike too often casts women in reductive binaries – iconic revolutionaries or passive victims – obscuring the everyday, cumulative, and deeply political labour of women's organisations that secure rights, redistribute power, and resist gender-based violence (GBV) under constraint (Brooklyn Institute 2013).

The production, mobilisation, and institutionalisation of knowledge about women in the MENA is not a purely academic concern; it is a matter of justice, visibility, and political recognition. Although “security” saturates regional debates on statecraft and development, women’s security is rarely conceptualised systematically – especially in authoritarian and transitional contexts (Oxfam 2020). Too often it is reduced to fragmented GBV policies or tokenistic discourse (Mannell & Jackson 2014). Through its investigation of how women’s organisations in Tunisia contributed to the production of women’s security both under Ben Ali (1987–2011) and the post-Ben Ali period (2011–2021), this thesis instead treats women’s security in Tunisia as an interconnected set of political, economic, and cultural conditions, and highlights the organisations that have worked for decades to reshape them. It traces how Tunisian women’s organisations produced and mobilised knowledge about women’s security across authoritarian and transitional contexts, treating knowledge not as a neutral artefact but as a socially embedded and contested process.

Women have long been central to sociopolitical change across the region – from Egypt in 1952 and Iran in 1979 to Tunisia in 2011 – yet their theoretical and practical contributions remain sidelined (Sadiq & Ennaji 2010). Beyond protest, women have challenged discriminatory laws and redefined citizenship (Olimat 2014). Much scholarship and policy, however, oscillates between orientalist portrayals, Western liberal prescriptions, and state-centred accounts that miss the plurality of women’s voices and epistemic practices (Alsharekh et al. 2021). As Abu-Lughod, Kandiyoti, Reynolds, and others argue, monolithic images of “Islamic patriarchy” or “Middle Eastern women” suppress more grounded analyses (Kandiyoti 1988; Abu-Lughod 2002; Reynolds 2006). Likewise, tradition/modernity binaries tend to vilify or romanticise reform, without grasping the complex negotiations women undertake daily to achieve them (Charrad & Zarrugh 2015; Mikdashi 2022; Kian 2023). These binaries obscure the fact that state-led gender reform does not always translate to progress – a point clearly borne out by my discussions in Chapters 2 and 3 on Tunisia’s particular history under its first President Habib Bourguiba (in power 1957 – 1987), and his successor President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Ben Ali) (1987 – 2011). They also obscure how women have historically negotiated, contested, and

redefined their status in ways that resisted colonialist and modernisation projects, as well as religious orthodoxy (2018).

This thesis takes a different approach. It is based on the conviction that women's security cannot be understood apart from the everyday and institutionalised efforts of women's organisations, who engage in ongoing struggles over laws, norms, budgets, and narratives in ways that are deeply embedded in their own political contexts. In Tunisia, its vibrant women's organisations have been under-analysed as an epistemic force capable of shaping national policy and gender discourses alike. My research directly responds to this void. It offers the first systematic, grounded, and historically-situated study of how women's organisations in Tunisia have redefined women's security through knowledge production, legal intervention, and political participation, since the rise to power of Ben Ali, to the present.

The urgency of this research lies in confronting deep asymmetries in global knowledge production. Whether in Egypt's Tahrir Square in 2011, Sudan's mass sitins ousting President Al-Bashir throughout 2019, or Iran's 2022–2023 'Mahsa Amini' protests, women's participation is instrumentalised during crises, then marginalised when decisions about governance, law, and resources are implemented (Alsharekh et al. 2021). This process is structural: it reflects the enduring claim that women's security and rights are a "luxury" to be postponed until after stability, growth, or religious consensus (Ibid). However, as countless women's movements have shown, women's subjugation is often the foundational logic that upholds broader systems of repression – even "the mother of all repressions" (Salem 2023).

This thesis intervenes in this discourse by rejecting portrayals of MENA women's activism as only donor-driven or state-managed. Scholars such as Al-Ali (2003) and Jad (2004) have highlighted how international donor agendas and authoritarian regimes have frequently sought to instrumentalise women's organisations, casting them as externally-dependent or regime-aligned, rather than autonomous actors. Whilst important dynamics, this thesis instead shows how Tunisian women's

organisations have generated their own theories, vocabularies, and practices of women's security – often in deliberate tension with both the state and international donor community. A reputation for "progressiveness" in Tunisia has masked structural exclusions and instrumentalised women for regime legitimation, demanding closer scrutiny of the actors, practices, and knowledges that shape women's lived security.

To my knowledge, this is the first study to systematically conceptualise and empirically trace women's organisations in Tunisia – and indeed the MENA – in this way, covering the period from the rise of Ben Ali to the present, and thusly offering an original framework for understanding Tunisian women's organisations as critical knowledge producers. Their work has focused not only on legal and political reform, but also on reframing what women's security means in the Tunisian context – bodily autonomy, access to justice, protection from violence, and economic and civic empowerment – in the face of state-led attempts to employ women's security as a vehicle for regime consolidation and international legitimation. These actors have produced knowledge through shadow reports, training manuals, campaign materials, and direct engagement with state structures; but they have also enacted it – by building shelters, drafting laws, mentoring candidates, and mobilising across regions and generations. In short, they have redefined the making of women's security – not as an abstract goal, but as a concrete practice of policymaking, learning, and resistance.

This work remains deeply relevant today. From Iran's 2020 #MeToo movement, to Lebanon's October 2019 anti-corruption protests, women have been at the forefront of challenging both state and societal patriarchy in the MENA. The region evidently continues to undergo profound transformations, even over a decade after the socalled 'Arab Spring'. Authoritarianism, economic precarity, and gendered inequality have not been resolved – they have been recalibrated. This is evident in Tunisia under its current President, Kais Saied, today, where democratic gains are once again being rolled back, even in "the only democracy to blossom from the Arab Spring" (Atlantic Council 2021). The MENA also continues to lag behind the global

average in gender parity, with current trends suggesting it would take over a century to reach equality (Salem 2023; AGDA 2024). Women in the region also still earn, on average, only 24% of what men do, and hold just 15% of political positions (Ibid). These structural obstacles to development, justice, and freedom are precisely why this thesis matters. Armed with insights from the activities of the organisations under study, we can begin to understand why, in the words of Bochra Belhaj Hmida – a prominent Tunisian lawyer, activist, and former Member of Parliament, whom I interviewed for this thesis – *"women have been the fuel of every political transformation in this country, but never its beneficiaries"* (Interview, 17 December 2024). This helps us not only explain the limits of past reforms, but identify practical and institutional remedies for achieving genuine, lasting security for women across the region.

By doing so, this thesis speaks to urgent contemporary concerns about the erosion of democratic space, the fragility of gender gains, and the resilience of patriarchal structures – concerns that are by no means unique to Tunisia. This thesis contributes to that global conversation, whilst remaining grounded in a deeply contextual, empirical study of Tunisia. Women's organisations in Tunisia have not simply advocated for change – they have built infrastructures of knowledge and action that continue to shape the landscape of women's rights today. This thesis thus seeks to document, theorise, and elevate that work – as a form of political agency, as a tool for structural change, and as a foundation for future progress in Tunisia and beyond.

Overview and Argument

This thesis investigates how certain Tunisian women's organisations contributed to the production of women's security in Tunisia across two key periods: the authoritarian era under President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (Ben Ali) (1987 – 2011), and the transitional decade following Tunisia's 2011 uprising, as the first sustained study examining how they derived influence from their epistemic capacity to generate, validate, and embed feminist knowledge within political, legal, and social institutions. By foregrounding this epistemic function, the central argument advanced

is that these Tunisian women's organisations also functioned as epistemic communities – an original analytical move.

Women's security, as used in this thesis, is derived from the conception of human security, which defines security as freedom from fear, want, and indignity (UNDP 1994; Ogata & Sen 2003). Encompassing both protection from direct physical harm (e.g. GBV), alongside the structural conditions necessary for political, economic, and personal autonomy, the human security framework shifts attention from the state to the individual as the referent of security (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde 1998; Paris 2001), as well as the "risks and insecurities faced by… groups at grassroots level" (LSE Ideas 2018:2). This includes secure access to rights, resources, and representation, foregrounding the lived experiences of those facing risk and crisis (Newman 2010). The term thus helpfully encompasses domains such as GBV, legal discrimination, political marginalisation, economic exclusion, and the denial of bodily autonomy, all of which threaten women's ability to live freely, safely, and with dignity. It does not, however, encompass issues such as state military defence, counterterrorism policy, or purely economic growth metrics, which fall outside the individualcentred scope of human security and, accordingly, outside the remit of this thesis.

Further, following Laura Shepherd's (2008) feminist and post-structural critique in *Gender, Violence, and Security*, this study conceives of women's security as meaningful only when understood as a discursive and embodied phenomenon: "studying the subjects produced through gendered violence…provides more coherent accounts of both violence and security" (Shepherd 2008:2). This justifies including domains such as legal discrimination, exclusion from political representation, and norms of inheritance and bodily autonomy within the ambit of women's security – domains that became especially salient in the post-2011 period, as Tunisia's political opportunity structure widened in the wake of Ben Ali's fall. As the political opportunity structure literature suggests, shifts in the openness of political institutions, elite alignments, and the availability of allies can create new possibilities for collective action and policy influence (Tarrow 1998; Meyer & Minkoff 2004), thereby shaping which aspects of women's security gain prominence and

traction. In a shifting political environment, Tunisia's women's organisations sought to address the broader spectrum of women's insecurity – legal, institutional, and physical.

The women's organisations I am studying – defined as "groups of women acting collectively to present public claims based on their gendered identity as women" (Moghadam 2018:4) – undoubtedly constituted a central stratum of Tunisian civil society. They long-operated within and against a state structure that simultaneously promoted and instrumentalised women's security, and navigated a political terrain shaped by colonial legacies, state feminism, authoritarian governance, and postregime change contestation.

However, my core argument is that these organisations, whilst widely and inarguably recognised in the literature as civil society organisations (CSOs), also had a central function in that they operated as ***epistemic communities*** – producing professional, policy-relevant knowledge and seeking to embed it within institutional frameworks. Existing accounts have located Tunisian women's organisations within broader civil society, emphasising their roles in advocacy, service provision, and the defence of women's rights under both authoritarian and democratic contexts (see Brand 1998; Charrad & Zarrugh 2014; Arfaoui & Moghadam 2016). I do not dispute these interpretations; however, I seek to supplement them by revealing a distinct, overlooked, set of activities through which these organisations exhibited the defining characteristics of epistemic communities.

In this thesis I therefore conceptualise these organisations as operating on two interlocking layers, rather than along a civil society/epistemic community binary. The *civil-society layer* includes familiar repertoires – advocacy, service provision, and rights-claiming. The *epistemic layer* comprises problem-framing, knowledgeproduction, and agenda-setting; the production and curation of comparative and domestic evidence; legal and policy drafting; standard-setting; and the brokering of knowledge between grassroots constituencies, state bureaucracies, and international partners. This dual-layer lens clarifies both successes and limits, without reclassifying these actors or erasing their civic identities. It instead explains

how civic action translated – sometimes only partially – into institutional change through sustained, situated knowledge work. In my understanding, this is the first academic study to apply such a conceptualisation to Tunisian women's organisations.

First theorised by John Ruggie in 1975, epistemic communities are understood as groups of experts sharing a specific way of understanding and interpreting the world, which influences their views on policy and social reality – or their "episteme" (Ruggie 1975). This definition was later expanded by Peter Haas to mean a network of knowledge-based experts or groups with an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within the domain of their expertise, whose influence derives from their ability to frame issues, define problems, and propose policy solutions based on a shared understanding of cause-and-effect relationships (Haas 1992a:3). By applying this lens to Tunisian women's organisations, my thesis offers the first sustained analysis that conceptualises and labels them explicitly as epistemic communities, foregrounding their epistemic function alongside their more widely-acknowledged advocacy and service roles. This analytical move extends existing understandings of these organisations, alongside offering a novel framework for situating them within the Tunisian political landscape.

The main women's organisations under study during the Ben Ali period include the National Union of Tunisian Women (*Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne*; **UNFT**), founded in 1956 shortly after Independence. UNFT was historically aligned with the ruling Neo-Destour and later Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party, and played a prominent role in projecting Tunisia's state feminist image both domestically and internationally. Alongside UNFT, two key independent women's organisations emerged during the final decades of the twentieth century: the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (*Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates*; **ATFD**), and the Tunisian Association of Women for Research and Development (*Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement*; **AFTURD**). ATFD and AFTURD were legalised in 1989 amidst brief political liberalisation, positioning themselves as explicitly *feminist* and advocating for women's rights, democracy, and secularism, often clashing with the regime's

instrumentalist approach to women's security. AFTURD also placed a particular emphasis on research, social development, and policy-oriented studies, creating a crucial knowledge base for women's advocacy in Tunisia.

I focus particularly on these three during the Ben Ali period because they represented the principal women-focused organisations legally authorised to operate in Tunisia at the time, each occupying a distinctive position within the political and social landscape: UNFT as the dominant state-aligned actor, and ATFD and AFTURD as independent organisations navigating the narrow spaces permitted by Ben Ali's authoritarian rule. Relatedly, UNFT enjoyed extensive state backing, membership networks, and funding that allowed it to dominate official women's advocacy (Brand 1998; Arfaoui & Moghadam 2016). ATFD and AFTURD, despite operating under severe constraints, developed robust organisational infrastructures, forged transnational linkages, and produced influential feminist knowledge that informed both local activism and international advocacy (Ibid; Mahfoudh & Mahfoudh 2014). Together, they were the most institutionally significant and epistemically active women's organisations of the era, making them indispensable for examining how women's security was defined, contested, and operationalised under authoritarian rule.

During the post-2011 period, my analysis continues to focus on ATFD and AFTURD, whilst introducing a third major actor: **Aswat Nissa** (*Voices of Women*), founded in 2011 (see Appendix Table A1). Aswat Nissa emerged during Tunisia's democratic transition, aiming to promote women's political participation, gender parity, and leadership, especially amongst younger generations. It distinguished itself by blending grassroots mobilisation with high-level policy advocacy, linking local feminist priorities with global human rights frameworks. I focus particularly on ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa during the post-2011 period because of their prominent and sustained roles in shaping Tunisia's gender landscape following the uprising. These organisations stood out for their institutional continuity, national reach, capacity for independent advocacy, and direct engagement in constitutional, legal, and policy reform processes during the country's democratic transition. Whilst the

post-2011 period witnessed the emergence of numerous new women's initiatives, ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa distinguished themselves through their longevity, professionalisation, and strategic influence in both grassroots mobilisation and national policymaking arenas. Their work consistently bridged the gap between local activism, expert knowledge production, and formal legal-political engagement – making them particularly suited to an analysis focused on the epistemic dimensions of women's advocacy in Tunisia.

To further capture the distinctiveness of these organisations as epistemic communities, this thesis builds upon the epistemic communities framework by integrating insights from the communities of practice (CoPs) approach. Developed by Wenger (1998), this approach emphasises the relational, practice-based, and learning-oriented dimensions of knowledge communities. Building on recent scholarship that brings epistemic communities and CoPs into dialogue (Adler and Faubert 2022), I develop an epistemic CoPs perspective that captures when Tunisian women's organisations operated not only individually as sources of expertise, but as collaborative, adaptive, and practice-based knowledge networks. This theoretical amalgam is deployed at various points in the thesis to analyse how different actors – such as UNFT and the 'Benalist' state[1] – functioned as separate epistemic CoPs, albeit with differing internal dynamics and degrees of autonomy.

This lens is also applied to the post-2011 period, when ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa constituted the core of a specific epistemic CoP – the *'Women's Security Epistemic Community of Practice'* (**WSECoP**) – a situated, knowledge-producing ecosystem operating at the intersection of research, policy, and activism on women's security. Under Ben Ali, independent women's organisations engaged in epistemic activity but were constrained by authoritarian control, limited pluralism, and political co-optation; their collaborations were largely ad hoc and reactive. I therefore reserve the WSECoP designation for the post-uprising period, when these actors operated with greater autonomy, expanded their epistemic practices, and were joined by organisations such as Beity, Femmes et Leadership, and Le Kef. Whilst these

[1] The term 'Benalist' was regularly employed by interviewees to refer to practices, institutions, or logics specific to the Ben Ali era; it will be adopted in this thesis to reflect their usage.

additional actors had more limited reach, they contributed meaningfully to a shared feminist knowledge-production network, with ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa driving the core *episteme*.

The WSECoP label is essential for the post-2011 context because joint activities became markedly more formalised, sustained, and ecosystem-like than the looser epistemic CoPs of the Ben Ali era. The scope of women's security itself also broadened to encompass legal security, political participation, and constitutional rights, alongside protection from physical harm. This expansion, combined with greater pluralism and opportunities for coalition-building, fostered a stronger sense of collective purpose. As confirmed by the majority of my interviewees, there was a clear, shared belief among these organisations that they were part of a coordinated effort capable of achieving meaningful change for women – a level of intentionality that warrants a distinct analytical category.

In summary, my argument features three units of analysis:

- **Epistemic communities:** individual women's organisations (e.g. ATFD, AFTURD, Aswat Nissa) that exhibit internal coherence, sustained knowledge production, and a shared *episteme* on women's rights and gender justice.
- **Epistemic CoPs:** larger constellations anchored by one or more epistemic communities, operating through shared practices and collaborative learning processes in pursuit of normative and policy change.
- **The WSECoP:** the specific epistemic CoP analysed in the post-2011 period. It includes ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa as core epistemic communities, and is supported by additional actors such as Beity, Femmes et Leadership, and Le Kef, whose activities, whilst smaller in scope, contribute to a broader feminist knowledge-production ecosystem.

Across its chapters, this thesis examines, at various points, the individual activities of the principal women's organisations under study as epistemic communities in their own right, as well as their collaborative initiatives within epistemic CoPs, and – in

Part B – their roles as core co-constitutive actors within the broader WSECoP. Each displayed deep internal coherence, sustained knowledge production, and tangible influence on women's security; yet their epistemic influence was also collective and symbiotic, unified through shared thematic focus, overlapping methodologies, strategic collaboration, and a mutual commitment to shaping Tunisia's women's security-making landscape.

It is important to note here that Section B of this thesis does not analyse UNFT. In the 2011 uprising's immediate aftermath, the organisation experienced significant internal turmoil following the ousting of its principal patron, President Ben Ali. My interview with the current UNFT President in September 2024 revealed that the organisation only began to regroup in late 2012, focusing primarily on supporting women affected by GBV. Thus, during the transitional period from 2011 to 2014, UNFT effectively ceased to operate as an epistemic community, retreating from public advocacy and policy engagement. This withdrawal was partly due to targeted attacks on its premises by radical Islamist groups, and partly to reputational damage: many new post-uprising actors perceived UNFT as part of the *ancien régime*, making collaboration politically costly. Although the organisation re-emerged from 2014 onwards, it did so in a different form, operating modestly as a service-oriented women's organisation, rather than as an epistemic community. This trajectory mirrors observed regional patterns, notably in Egypt after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, when organisations founded by his wife Suzanne Mubarak – such as the Suzanne Mubarak Women's International Peace Movement – collapsed under the weight of their association with the former regime. In Egypt, such groups were labelled *felool* (فلول), meaning "remnants" of the old order, a term equally useful for understanding why UNFT was politically marginalised in post-2011 Tunisia.

Theoretical and Empirical Positioning

Having established the motivation and central arguments of this thesis, it is now necessary to situate the project within the broader intellectual landscape from which it draws and to which it seeks to contribute. This section positions the thesis along two principal axes: first, within the literatures on epistemic communities and CoPs, from which its theoretical framework is derived; and second, within the empirical

scholarship on Tunisian women's organisations, with which its primary analytical intervention is engaged. Whilst the thesis advances theoretical innovations – particularly through the development of the concept of epistemic CoPs – its principal contribution is empirical: offering a grounded, contextually nuanced account of women's organisations' – as epistemic actors rather than solely CSOs – knowledge production and political agency in Tunisia's evolving political landscape. This empirical reframing advances a new understanding of how women's security was constructed and contested in Tunisia over time.

Theoretical Foundations

Epistemic Communities Literature

The concept of epistemic communities was first introduced to the discipline of International Relations (IR) by John Ruggie (1975), who argued that institutionalisation processes, whether within states or internationally, are not only shaped by the behaviour of actors but by "the epistemes through which political relationships are visualised" (Ruggie 1975:569). For Ruggie, epistemic communities were defined as actors sharing "a dominant way of looking at social reality, a set of shared symbols and references, mutual expectations, and a mutual predictability of intention" (Ibid), thus laying the groundwork for theorising the cognitive dimension of political change. Peter M. Haas (1992) subsequently developed the concept into an observable, positivist framework, applying it to international decision-making processes marked by technical complexity and uncertainty. Haas recast epistemic communities as "knowledge-based communities of experts", generating authoritative, policy-relevant understandings about complex technical issues (Haas 1992a:16). Central to Haas' formulation was the emphasis on expertise as a primary source of social power: "the epistemic community members' prestige and reputation for expertise accord them access to the political system… their claims to knowledge serve as their primary social power resource" (Haas 1992a:17). Although alternative definitions emerged, such as Sebenius' (1992:325) description of epistemic communities as "natural coalitions of believers" fostering a shared policy project; and Stone's (1996:87) portrayal of them as specialists aiming to extend their beliefs into public policy – Haas' fourfold criteria for epistemic communities remained dominant –

a shared set of principled beliefs, shared causal beliefs, a consensual knowledge base, and a common policy enterprise (Haas 1992a:3).

Despite its innovative impulses, the epistemic communities framework has faced important critiques. Dunlop (2011) noted that “there are still relatively few studies which explicitly test or develop the concept” (Dunlop 2011:2), and that empirical applications have been largely confined to Western technocratic fields, such as environmental policy (Ringius 1997; Faleg 2012; Kourtellis 2021). As such, an uncritical adoption of the concept here risks perpetuating a Western-centric bias that fails to account for “regional peoples’ multiple and contending conceptions of security” (Bilgin 2013:2). Moreover, the concept’s conflation of epistemic communities with expert communities has been problematised. Haas’ original formulation privileged formal, institutionalised expertise, often marginalising grassroots knowledge actors – an omission that subsequent scholarship has only partially corrected (Antoniades 2003; Dunlop 2012). As Antoniades (2003:37) cautions, much of the literature “draws boundaries between the political and the epistemic”, mistakenly portraying epistemic communities as supplanting political processes, rather than being deeply enmeshed within them. Indeed, as Dunlop (2012:5) observes, “the community itself is rarely the centre of analytical attention”, with studies often prioritising policy outcomes over the epistemic structures that produce them.

This thesis addresses these limitations by expanding the epistemic communities framework into non-Western, transitional contexts, examining how Tunisian women’s organisations produced knowledge about women’s security through relational, contested, and politically charged practices. I additionally explicitly engage Dunlop’s critique by foregrounding the communities themselves within my analysis – their internal practices, knowledge production processes, and modes of relational engagement.

Communities of Practice Literature

Developed initially by Lave and Wenger (1991), the CoPs framework reconceptualised learning as a socially-situated process, rooted in participation rather than mere knowledge transmission. According to Lave and Wenger, “learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners” (Lave and Wenger 199:29), with knowledge, identity, and meaning being co-constructed through ongoing engagement with communal practices. Their concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” described how newcomers are socialised into communities by gradually moving from peripheral to full participation, challenging cognitive models of learning that abstract knowledge from its social and historical contexts.

However, the original CoPs framework has also faced critiques. Scholars such as Cox (2005), Gherardi (2009, 2016), Roberts (2010), and Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner (2016) noted that Lave and Wenger’s early work underdeveloped the role of institutional structures, power asymmetries, and conflict. By emphasising community cohesion, early CoP models risked neglecting the tensions, exclusions, and strategic adaptations that often underpin communal knowledge production. More recently, Federica Bicchi (2023) has advanced a significant reorientation of the CoPs literature. Drawing on critical constructivist insights from international relations and organisational theory, Bicchi challenged both the romanticised view of CoPs as organic formations, and the managerial view of CoPs as engineered by institutions. Instead, she argued for the ontological primacy of practice, contending that communities only emerge when foundational practices – the practices that define *how* they work, interact, and make sense of their domain – are aligned amongst participants. This deepened return to practice, aligned with scholars such as Gherardi and Nicolini (2002), foregrounds the embodied, performative, and power-laden nature of communal knowledge construction. Bicchi’s intervention underscores that CoPs cannot be simply created by fiat; they are the contingent, situated outcomes of social practices that evolve through negotiation, contestation, and alignment.

This thesis draws on Lave and Wenger's original conceptualisation of CoPs, as well as more recent critical developments, treating Tunisian women's organisations as communities formed through ongoing, contested practices of knowledge production and mobilisation within a volatile political landscape.

Combining the Frameworks: Epistemic Communities of Practice

Building on these literatures, this thesis applies and empirically specifies the concept of **epistemic CoPs** (see Appendix Figure A1), defined here as hybrid constellations composed of one or more epistemic communities at their core, which are embedded within, and interact through, sustained shared practices with broader institutional and organisational fields, following Adler and Faubert (2022).

To recapitulate, I determine the existence of an epistemic CoP by the presence of an epistemic community (or communities) at its core, engaged in collaborative practices with other actors – whether state institutions, international partners, or peer organisations – within a bounded domain of knowledge and action. Thus, epistemic CoPs, as theorised here, are not merely analytical containers for grouping actors; they are dynamic arenas of expert co-production. Defined by shared repertoires of knowledge, mutual engagement in policy-relevant practices, and joint enterprise around specific domains (in this case, women's security), these formations offer a powerful framework for understanding how knowledge on women's security is generated, contested, and institutionalised in Tunisia.

By synthesising epistemic communities theory's emphasis on authoritative knowledge, with the CoPs framework's focus on relational learning and practice, I conceptualise Tunisian women's organisations as holders of expert knowledge, as well as dynamic, adaptive, and collaboratively evolving knowledge producers. The epistemic dimension captures how they cultivated understandings of women's security, gender justice, and civic rights – understandings that guided their advocacy and norm-shaping efforts. The practice dimension highlights how these organisations produced, adapted, and operationalised knowledge through collective action, peerto-

peer learning, and everyday political engagement. Epistemic CoPs therefore feature not only shared causal beliefs and principled understandings, but also sustained joint practices of meaning-making, advocacy, and institutional interaction.

This conception expands upon much of the existing literature (e.g., Charrad 2001; Brand 1998; Arfaoui & Moghadam 2016), which has not theorised upon the sustained, structured, and strategic production of policy-relevant knowledge that these organisations undertook. My framework brings this epistemic function to the forefront, recognising them as civil society actors which typically behaved as expert communities engaged in the systematic generation and embedding of ideas, norms, and strategies within Tunisia's institutional and political arenas.

Part B of the thesis charts the emergence of the new *WSE*CoP. This CoP was catalysed by Tunisia's political opening and shaped by inter-organisational collaboration, shared civic goals, and sustained pedagogical, constitutional, and advocacy work. Whilst the WSECoP encompassed a wide network of women's rights actors, three principal organisations – ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa – formed its epistemic core. Around them, a constellation of like-minded organisations engaged in practices of mutual reinforcement and advocacy diffusion, creating a shared learning environment and an epistemic alliance.

As fleshed out above, I use the WSECoP designation for Part B, but not for Part A, because the post-2011 context fundamentally altered the scale, structure, and formality of collaborative epistemic activity. In the Ben Ali period (Part A), whilst independent women's organisations such as ATFD and AFTURD engaged in epistemic work and participated in epistemic CoPs, these formations were more ad hoc, reactive, and heavily constrained by authoritarian controls, limiting their pluralism, autonomy, and capacity for sustained collective action. By contrast, in the post-uprising period (Part B), inter-organisational collaboration became more formalised, sustained, and ecosystem-like, supported by greater political openness, a broadened agenda for women's security, and the emergence of new indigenous actors whose work complemented that of the more established groups. This

qualitative shift justifies conceptualising their joint activities not as loose epistemic CoPs but as a coherent WSECoP – a structured, collective actor with an identifiable epistemic core and a wider network of contributors.

It is also crucial to remember, across both Parts A and B, that the epistemic CoPs being studied were operating in a context-specific environment, guided by Bicchi's (2023) insistence that community formation must be traced to the alignment of embodied, performative practices, rather than presumed organisational coherence. They operated in a non-liberal, post-colonial, and highly specific socio-political context, marked by overlapping legacies of state feminism, authoritarian governance, and contested democratic transition. Additionally, their knowledge production processes were not mere translations of global feminist norms, but rather involved the situated adaptation and negotiation of feminist principles to Tunisia's unique political and cultural realities. In this sense, their epistemic authority derived not only from their expertise or technocratic credentials, but also from their embeddedness within, and responsiveness to, Tunisia's evolving struggles over gender, citizenship, and governance. Their practices were relational, iterative, and fundamentally shaped by their immediate political and cultural environment.
Finally, and importantly, the introduction of epistemic CoPs is not a purely theoretical move. Rather, it provides a **flexible, empirically-sensitive analytical tool** to better study and explain the empirical phenomenon of how Tunisian women's organisations navigated and shaped the production of women's security during both authoritarian rule and democratic transition. Although it contributes both to broadening the epistemic communities and CoPs literatures, this thesis is thus ultimately driven by empirical investigation, rather than theoretical abstraction. The development of the epistemic CoP framework is a response to the empirical realities encountered in the field: the relational, adaptive, knowledge-intensive practices of Tunisian women's organisations.

Empirical Foundations: Studies on Tunisian Women's Organisations

This thesis is anchored in, and seeks to contribute to, the growing empirical literature on Tunisian women's organisations. Since the 1990s, several studies have explored

the pivotal role that women's organisations have played in shaping Tunisia's gender politics, as part of Tunisian civil society (Brand 1998; Charrad 2001; Charrad & Zarrugh 2014; Arfaoui & Moghadam 2016). However, they also had central epistemic functions as part of civil society – namely their role in producing, validating, and disseminating authoritative knowledge about women's security – which existing scholarship has overlooked. My thesis thus builds upon and diverges from this literature, fleshed out here below, by explicitly theorising Tunisian women's organisations as epistemic communities – and, in the post-2011 period, as coconstitutive actors in the WSECoP.

Whilst limited scholarly work has focused on the activities of ATFD and AFTURD under Ben Ali, some authors have depicted them as reactionary CSOs, whose policy impact and autonomy were heavily constrained (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016; Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh 2014, Wolf 2023). Others, such as Brand (1998), argue that their existence as NGOs primarily served symbolic purposes for the Ben Ali regime, inadvertently legitimising state feminism without substantially challenging authoritarian structures. Whilst these characterisations carry merit – Ben Ali indeed co-opted feminist initiatives selectively and systematically limited their scope – such interpretations arguably overlook the complex interactions between knowledge, activism, and authoritarian governance. As this thesis contends, ATFD and AFTURD, alongside their undisputed membership in civil society, also operated as genuine epistemic communities. Through strategic mobilisation of specialised knowledge, the creation of transnational alliances, and the shaping of public discourse, they tangibly influenced both policy debates and broader conceptions of women's security, even within a highly constrained political environment. Ignoring this epistemic dimension would thus obscure a key aspect of how feminist knowledge practices can operate under authoritarian conditions.

In the post-2011 period, the role of women's organisations in Tunisia has been more widely recognised in scholarship. Authors such as Charrad and Zarrugh (2014) and Hibou (2015) have highlighted the transformative role of women in Tunisia's democratic transition, arguing that groups like ATFD and Aswat Nissa were

instrumental in embedding gender equality within the new constitutional framework, notably securing the inclusion of Article 46 in the 2014 Constitution, which guarantees the promotion and protection of women's rights. At the same time, critical perspectives – particularly from Grami (2018) – have drawn attention to the persistent gaps between legal reforms and lived realities. Whilst the legal landscape in Tunisia became one of the most progressive regionally, social and cultural barriers continued to undermine full gender equality, particularly in rural areas (Boughzala 2018; Ben Achour 2014). Brym and Andersen (2015) similarly note the uneven public support for feminist reforms, reflecting ongoing societal resistance in more conservative sectors. The literature also captures the complex political dynamics that women's organisations navigated post-2011. Roy (2017) and Charrad and Zarrugh (2014) examine how groups like ATFD engaged with the rise of Islamist political forces, with debates around contentious religiously-motivated issues demonstrating capacity to mobilise both nationally and internationally to resist regressive gender norms, ultimately securing critical victories for women.

Across this empirical landscape, one striking gap persists: whilst Tunisian women's organisations are consistently recognised as civil society advocates, existing studies overlook their strategic knowledge production – including through legal analyses, constitutional interventions, and public pedagogy – and have not analysed this work as epistemic labour. This thesis addresses that gap by adopting the analytical lens of epistemic communities and epistemic CoPs, enabling a fuller understanding of these organisations not only as advocates for legal and political reforms, but as knowledge producers who have actively constructed the normative frameworks, institutional architectures, and public discourses through which women's security has been reimagined and renegotiated in Tunisia.

In sum, this thesis extends epistemic communities and CoPs theory into new empirical terrain, whilst offering a grounded, historically-sensitive analysis of Tunisian women's organisations as critical epistemic actors. By foregrounding the knowledge-producing dimensions of women's organisations, it seeks to illuminate how struggles for women's security are constructed, contested, and institutionalised over time,

bearing in mind the urgency of studying these dynamics, discussed in the first section of this Introduction.

Key Original Contributions

In light of the above, this thesis thus makes several *original contributions*:

1. It is amongst the first to use epistemic communities theory to analyse women's issues.[2] This extends the framework beyond its conventional, technocratic focus on domains such as environmental or economic policy. In doing so, it demonstrates how epistemic authority can also be generated through feminist knowledge practices, activism, and advocacy – fields thus far excluded from epistemic communities scholarship.
2. It is the first to use epistemic communities to analyse Tunisian women's organisations and one of the few to apply the concept to a non-Western case study.[3] This contributes to de-centring Western-centric assumptions in the literature and highlights how epistemic agency functions in postcolonial, authoritarian, and transitional contexts.
3. It is the first to apply epistemic communities theory to a longitudinal comparative case study, tracing the development of epistemic agency across authoritarian and post-authoritarian contexts, thus revealing how epistemic community agency is not static but evolves across political contexts.
4. It is the first to systematically combine epistemic communities and CoPs theory to empirically study an epistemic CoP, thus providing a more dynamic tool for studying how knowledge communities function in different political environments.

[2] The only one other study this author is aware of is Okech (2020), which studies African feminist epistemic communities to highlight the dynamics of gender and racialised power asymmetries operating within UK and South African universities' decolonization projects.

[3] Whilst the epistemic communities framework was originally developed in and for Western policy contexts, a small but growing body of scholarship has applied the concept to non-Western settings. See, inter alia, Hjorth (1994); Youde (2005); Lavelle (2001); Menkoff et al. (2010); Sandal (2011). Nonetheless, these studies rarely examine women's organisations or women's security.

5. It introduces the idea of a WSECoP as a feminist research and advocacy ecosystem, offering a more nuanced account of Tunisian women's organisations as co-constitutive epistemic agents whose authority and influence stem from sustained knowledge practices. More broadly, the WSECoP concept opens up comparative possibilities for studying how alternative women's organisations construct epistemic authority in other postauthoritarian or transitional settings.

These contributions thus clearly highlight women's organisations in Tunisia as central epistemic agents producing, validating, and mobilising expert knowledge, a critical concern of this thesis. Their identity as epistemic communities, which is not separated from their traditional CSO status, is also influenced by Tunisia's unique historical, political, and symbolic context, wherein women have long stood at the heart of national identity-making. Since Independence in 1956, Tunisia has largely negotiated its statehood and modernity through competing visions of women's rights – from Ben Ali's state feminism to Islamist reassertions of patriarchal authority. This history has endowed women's organisations with an expanded purview: they are not only service providers or advocacy groups, but *architects of Tunisia's gender order*,

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holding a "hegemonic position in civil society" (Debuysere 2017:247). Further, after 2011, unlike cases where women's rights are newly inscribed into political transitions, Tunisia's feminist actors inherited a state feminist legacy that both empowered and constrained them. Rather than simply demanding new rights, they had to decide whether to defend, transform, or dismantle the existing gender regime. This made their work especially epistemic in nature – entailing not only mobilisation and advocacy, but the production of conceptual, legal, and normative frameworks for women's security.

Research Design and Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design grounded in a constructivist epistemology. By constructivist, I refer to the ontological and epistemological premise that social realities – including concepts such as "women's

security" – are not fixed or given, but are socially constructed through discourse, practice, and interaction. This approach treats meanings, identities, and norms as contingent and historically situated, and it prioritises understanding how actors themselves produce, negotiate, and contest these meanings in specific contexts. Rather than testing pre-defined hypotheses, the research is exploratory and inductive, aiming to reconstruct how feminist epistemic practices evolved through specific organisational, political, and historical trajectories.

The starting point of 1987 was chosen not simply because it marks regime change, but because Ben Ali's ascent reconfigured the institutional and discursive terrain on which women's security was defined, contested, and practised. As Chapter 2 shows, his rule exemplified "upgraded authoritarianism", combining liberalising rhetoric with tightened control. Within this framework, women's security became a key instrument of regime legitimation, and women's organisations operated in a space where women's rights were simultaneously celebrated and instrumentalised. This constituted Tunisia's model of **state feminism**: a top-down project that mobilised women's security to signal modernity, reinforce regime authority, and project progressiveness. Analysing this period illuminates how these organisations built and exercised epistemic authority, laying the groundwork for greater autonomy after 2011. Whilst 'upgraded authoritarianism' is deployed to explain the organisation and strategic logic of the Ben Ali regime, particularly in relation to state feminism, it is not deployed as the overarching theoretical foundation for the entire study. Rather, it serves as a contextual and explanatory lens specific to Chapters 2–3, where it helps illuminate how the regime co-opted, instrumentalised, and controlled actors such as UNFT. However, the notion remains analytically useful post-2011 as a point of comparison, especially in identifying continuities in state-society relations and the persistence of gendered governance instituted under Ben Ali.

The 2011 uprising is treated as a critical juncture representing the fall of Ben Ali's regime, as well as a dramatic reconfiguration of political space allowing new forms of women-led activism to emerge. My choice to end the analysis in 2021 is equally deliberate. By 2021, Tunisia's democratic transition had visibly stalled, with current

President Kais Saied's July 25 power grab effectively dissolving key democratic institutions. This moment marked the closure of Tunisia's most sustained experiment with pluralistic governance since independence, rendering it a natural endpoint. Ending in 2021 also allows the thesis to capture a full decade of post-uprising activism, highlighting both the advances women's organisations secured, and the structural obstacles they continued to confront

Longitudinal Case Study Justification and 'Why Tunisia?'

This thesis adopts Tunisia as its primary longitudinal case study, investigating how women's organisations contributed to the production of women's security both under Ben Ali (1987–2011) and the post-Ben Ali period (2011–2021). A longitudinal single case study design is chosen as it provides a framework for capturing complex causal relationships over time, enabling an in-depth, within-case analysis through qualitative process tracing (Bennett and George 1997; Falleti 2006). By extending the study beyond a single historical period, the thesis introduces a crucial comparative dimension: tracing not only developments and continuities, but also significant ruptures across Tunisia's evolving political landscape. The 2011 uprising, treated as a watershed moment, allows for an analysis of how women's organisations recalibrated their strategies, coalitions, and knowledge practices in response to new opportunities and constraints. Thus, even whilst relying on a single case study, the thesis achieves meaningful within-case comparison over time.

Process tracing, broadly defined as the method of identifying causal mechanisms and linking independent variables to outcomes through detailed, sequential analysis (George and Bennett 2005:206), is particularly well-suited to examining how epistemic communities evolved, adapted, and operated differently across authoritarian and transitional contexts. Case-centric process tracing also permits the study of micro-level causal dynamics (Checkel 2007) and facilitates the formulation of new hypotheses concerning epistemic community behaviour beyond Western and technocratic settings, a goal aligned with this thesis' broader ambitions.

Beyond the methodological benefits, Tunisia is an especially fitting empirical site for several substantive reasons. Since Independence in 1956, women's rights have stood at the heart of Tunisia's national identity-making project. Unlike in many other MENA countries, the status of women became a key political symbol, deployed through the doctrine of state feminism under Ben Ali to legitimise modernisation narratives, regime consolidation, and Tunisia's international reputation (Charrad & Zarrugh 2014). As such, debates over women's security in Tunisia are not marginal; they are constitutive of the country's political development.

Critically, existing scholarship has largely neglected the epistemic contributions of women's organisations under Ben Ali. As Chapter 2 discusses, scholars of the Ben Ali era have tended to focus exclusively on the regime's coercive apparatuses – its security services, intelligence networks, and ruling party structures (Erdle 2010; Lutterbeck 2015; Wolf 2023) – thereby casting civil society as either ineffectual or regime-captured. This portrayal overlooks the nuanced and varied agency exercised by women's organisations operating under authoritarian constraint. Even as Ben Ali's regime sought to muzzle and co-opt associations, Tunisian civil society did not lose its vitality, strength, or international openness (Kefi 2015:3). This thesis demonstrates that women's organisations such as ATFD and AFTURD, despite repression and co-optation, actively engaged in knowledge production, advocacy, and transnational networking. Their influence varied over time and across domains, but their epistemic practices and contributions to women's security discourse deserve closer examination. Ignoring these dynamics risks reproducing a flattening narrative of civil society under Benalist authoritarianism.

Moreover, an in-depth study of these organisations' activities during the Ben Ali period not only fills a major empirical lacuna in the literature, but also enriches our understanding of Tunisia's post-2011 trajectory. It links the relative strength and agility of these actors during the democratic transition back to their prior epistemic and organisational work, demonstrating that their post-uprising influence did not emerge ex nihilo, but was seeded through decades of strategic engagement, survival, and learning under authoritarian rule.

Finally, Tunisia's experience offers broader lessons for the study of epistemic communities. To date, the epistemic communities literature has overwhelmingly focused on Europe and technocratic policy domains (Radaelli 1999; Faleg 2012; Cross 2013; Kourtelis 2021). This thesis thus represents one of the first efforts to deploy and adapt epistemic community theory to the Middle East, whilst also extending its application across different historical periods within a single case. In so doing, it sheds light on how epistemic communities operate in conditions of constrained political opportunity structures, variable repression, and transitional uncertainty. This is also the first study comparatively studying epistemic communities across historical time periods, with the concept typically applied in the literature to single and isolated case studies (Cross 2013:143).

Research Questions

The study is structured around the following central research questions:

1. How have certain Tunisian women's organisations – as epistemic communities and within epistemic communities of practice – contributed to the production of women's security across both authoritarian and transitional contexts?
2. Why is it more analytically productive to conceptualise certain Tunisian women's organisations, heretofore framed solely as civil society actors, also as epistemic communities?
3. Under what political and organisational conditions did these epistemic communities extend into epistemic CoPs?
4. How have the dynamics of state feminism – under Ben Ali and in its post-2011 legacies – shaped the scope and limits of Tunisian women's organisations' epistemic activities on women's security?

These questions are designed to elicit both empirical insights into the practices of Tunisian women's organisations; and theoretical contributions to the study of epistemic agency in contested political environments.

Methodological Approach

This thesis employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology. It treats women's organisations as epistemic agents whose knowledge practices are historically and socially embedded. The interpretive dimension lies in its focus on understanding how actors themselves make sense of, construct, and negotiate the meaning of "women's security" within their specific political and cultural contexts. Rather than treating concepts, categories, and practices as fixed or self-evident, the analysis seeks to uncover the perspectives, narratives, and framings through which these organisations define problems, articulate solutions, and legitimise their authority. The methodology is grounded in constructivist assumptions that meaning is coconstructed through interaction, and that knowledge production is situated, relational, and politically charged.

Given the thesis' focus on understanding practices, discourses, and meaning-making processes, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and process tracing were chosen to best capture the complex, historically situated practices through which Tunisian women's organisations have produced, mobilised, and institutionalised knowledge across authoritarian and transitional contexts.

The data set

- *Primary Sources and Document Analysis:* The thesis draws extensively on primary sources that capture the activities and discourses of Tunisian women's organisations, as well as the broader political environment in which they operated. These include campaign materials, shadow reports, and legal studies produced by UNFT, ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa, which provided direct insight into their epistemic practices and advocacy strategies.

  Primary data also comprised reports by international organisations and think tanks, as well as government speeches, public statements, and media reports published during both the Ben Ali and post-2011 periods. These sources were subjected to interpretive textual analysis – "a methodology that involves

understanding language… in texts to gain information regarding how people make sense of and communicate life and life experiences" (Hawkins 2016:2). This was useful for my study's purposes, since texts are often affected by and indicative of larger social structures, in addition to interacting with the larger historical, cultural, political, and ethical contexts for which they exist (Ibid). These documents were examined both for their explicit content and for the discursive strategies they employed regarding women's rights, the state, and security.

A key component of document analysis was also the use of Arabic-language minutes from Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly sessions between February 2012 and February 2014. Obtained and translated directly by this author, these minutes provided critical insights into women's organisations' interventions in constitutional debates, and served as vital sources for Chapters 5 and 6.

- *Interviews:* To complement the documentary analysis, I conducted 13 semistructured elite and expert interviews between August 2024 and January 2025, with key actors including Tunisian academics and researchers, independent activists, and members or leaders of the women's organisations under study.
  These included individuals associated with ATFD, AFTURD, Aswat Nissa, and UNFT (see Appendix Table 1). My sampling strategy combined purposive and snowball sampling. Based on my fieldwork and documentary review, the leadership and senior membership circles of ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa during the periods under study comprised approximately 20–25 individuals consistently active in epistemic activities. The 13 individuals I was able to reach therefore provided robust qualitative coverage.

  Initial contact was established through the Tunisian academic and activist Amel Mahfoudh via social media. This led to connections with veteran women's rights activist Dorra Mahfoudh, activist and former ATFD and AFTURD member Khedija Arfaoui, and eventually to senior figures in ATFD and Aswat Nissa, including the

latter's President and Founder, Ikram Ben Said. This snowballing method played a crucial role in expanding the interview pool. One additional former AFTURD member was interviewed via email, and saturation was largely reached by January 2025, with key epistemic narratives consistently reiterated across interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility and depth, as they are particularly suited to exploring attitudes, values, beliefs, and motives (Barriball and White 1994). This method also enabled probing into sensitive issues around state co-optation, international influence, and internal contestations, with careful attention to non-verbal cues and discursive patterns. Further, according to Burnham et al. (2008:231), semi-structured interviews are effective when treating the respondent as an expert on the topic at hand, allowing for flexibility, probing, and nuanced exploration of complex political and organisational dynamics.

Interviews were conducted via phone calls and online via Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The interviews varied in length, ranging from in-depth conversations of 30–90 minutes to shorter exploratory conversations of 20–30 minutes. In one case, an email interview was conducted. Two interviewees requested anonymity, whilst others consented to be cited by name. Four interviewees did not wish to be recorded.

Given the author's fluency in Arabic, and with the majority of Tunisians speaking French as a second language, as opposed to English, the interviews were conducted using a combination of Arabic and English, depending on the interviewee's preference. Although most interviewees were very adept at using English, the use of Arabic allowed for the capturing of culturally-specific terms and expressions, which the author translated directly where necessary for inclusion in the thesis.

- *Secondary Literature:* Primary data was triangulated with a rich corpus of secondary materials, including scholarly books and articles on Tunisian politics, authoritarianism, state feminism, and women's organisations. These works

provided important contextual grounding and interpretive frameworks, whilst also helping identify analytical gaps that primary sources and interviews could fill.

- *Analytical Strategy:* A flexible process tracing approach was employed to connect the practices, discourses, and knowledge production activities of women's organisations across different political periods. Process tracing, as defined by George and McKeown (1985:35), provides "techniques to uncover historical connections among specific events", and is particularly useful for reconstructing causal narratives from diverse qualitative evidence. In this thesis, process tracing is however used not as a rigid causal testing device, but as a method to map key patterns across epistemic practices, organisational strategies, and framings of women's security over time, linking micro-level organisational activities to broader structural transformations. Attention was paid not only to what was said, but how claims were constructed, legitimised, and contested across different political periods.

Clarifying Analytical, Theoretical, and Conceptual Boundaries

This section outlines the analytical focus of the thesis, specifying its scope, key terminological frameworks, and the boundaries within which the analysis proceeds. As outlined in previous sections, this thesis focuses specifically on the activities of certain women's organisations in Tunisia – notably UNFT, ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa – who are designated in the literature and Tunisian political landscape as the country's "secular" or "feminist" women's organisations (Voorhoeve 2015). Islamist women's organisations fall largely outside the temporal, institutional, and epistemic parameters of this study.

This exclusion is grounded in both historical and analytical considerations. As detailed in Chapters 3 and 4, under the Ben Ali regime, Islamist organisations – including Islamist-aligned women's groups – were subject to systemic repression and prohibited from operating legally. Consequently, they lacked institutional continuity or public visibility across the authoritarian period. In contrast, organisations such as ATFD and AFTURD were legally recognised and able to develop a sustained, if constrained, presence across both the Ben Ali and post-Ben Ali periods,

thus allowing for the kind of longitudinal and comparative analysis this thesis seeks to develop. Including Islamist women's organisations, whose impact occurred primarily after 2011, would therefore fall outside the temporal focus of the study.

Further, secular and Islamist women's groups differ significantly in their epistemic foundations. ATFD, AFTURD, and similar organisations generally draw upon secular, human rights-based frameworks to conceptualise women's security. By contrast, many Islamist women's organisations ground their understandings in Islamic jurisprudence and gendered interpretations of *Shari'a*. These divergent epistemic orientations suggest that whilst both engage with issues of women's security, they form distinct epistemic communities. Analysing them together risks obscuring the specific knowledge practices and strategies through which secular organisations shaped Tunisia's women's security landscape. Nevertheless, this thesis acknowledges that Islamist organisations have been vital actors in Tunisia's evolving women's rights scene. Their exclusion from the core analysis should not be read as a dismissal of their significance, but rather as a necessary analytical choice for the present study's aims and purposes.

Additionally, throughout the thesis, secular organisations such as ATFD and AFTURD will be referred to as "feminist" organisations. However, it is important to note that this thesis does not engage with feminist IR theory in any deep theoretical sense. There already exists a substantial body of feminist IR scholarship that has examined women-focused CSOs in Tunisia (e.g. Charrad 2001; Al-Ali 2003; Moghadam 2013; Charrad & Zarrugh 2014; Arfaoui & Moghadam 2016; Debuysere 2016; Debuysere 2018; Grami 2018). This work has made invaluable contributions by situating Tunisian women's activism within broader debates on patriarchy, state feminism, and transnational feminist politics. I recognise the utility and importance of this literature; however, my contribution does not lie in further extending feminist IR analysis – a terrain already richly explored. Rather, the novelty of my approach is to locate Tunisian women's organisations within the literatures on epistemic communities and CoPs. My central concern is not to interrogate their feminist nature – which I fully acknowledge and appreciate – but to analyse how they produced and

mobilised authoritative knowledge, and how their epistemic labour shaped women's security in Tunisia. My analytical innovation is to theorise these organisations as epistemic communities, thereby exposing dimensions of knowledge production and institutional influence that existing IR work has not foregrounded.

The usage of "feminist" is also a pragmatic choice, reflective of the way organisations such as ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa self-identify and are labelled by other political actors in Tunisia, including both Islamist and secular political parties. Conceptually, I do draw on terminology from feminist IR, which is thus not at all ignored, including for example my reliance upon Shepherd's work on security discourses, fleshed out above. For definitional purposes, when I use the term "feminist" in reference to these organisations, I am thus guided by feminist IR scholarship, which provides the grounding for understanding feminism as the dismantling of patriarchal systems and the pursuit of gender equality in law, policy, and society (e.g. Tickner 1992; Shepherd 2008; Enloe 2014); and in the Tunisian context specifically as women's organisations' "interactions with other forms of power such as politics, religion, and class…and the extent to which such activism is a renegotiation of women's identities and status" (Grami 2018:24).

Yet, in any case, as Voorhoeve (2015) cautions, one must approach labels such as "secularists" and "Islamists" – and their proxy usage of "feminists" versus "Islamists" in Tunisia – with caution. These binary categories often reflect a legacy of authoritarian state propaganda which divided society into 'progressive' secularists and 'backwards' Islamists, obscuring on-the-ground complexities. Secularists "are not necessarily feminists, feminists can be Islamists" (Ibid:3), and understandings of what constitutes women's rights vary depending on class, age, region, and ideology.

Moreover, my interviews with past ATFD presidents, AFTURD members, and the current Aswat Nissa President revealed that, from a Western academic perspective, the 'feminist' label would be more appropriately applied to many of these women as *individuals*. The majority were Western-educated and espoused progressive, and on occasion radical, positions on gender equality, bodily autonomy, and reform of

discriminatory laws — positions that align closely with transnational feminist norms and would set them apart from Islamist women's organisations. However, the constraints imposed by Tunisian political praxis and prevailing cultural norms meant that, at the organisational level, the outcomes of their activities did not always reflect the full breadth of these individual feminist ideals.

Similarly, the label 'secular' also requires contextualisation. Politically, these women were not Islamists and did not direct their organisations according to Islamic principles, which is why they, and others, used the term secular to distinguish themselves from Islamist actors. Yet, individually, each woman I spoke to indicated being a practising Muslim. In interviews, they frequently referred to *Allah* in ways that reflected personal piety — for example, invoking gratitude to God for successes *("alhamdulillah")*, expressing hope or resolve with *"inshallah*", or referring to prayer and fasting practices during Ramadan. In the Tunisian context, therefore, *secular* signified the absence of an Islamist political orientation, rather than the absence of personal religious belief.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is organised into three major parts. The opening chapters (Chapters 1–2) lay the theoretical and contextual foundations of the study. The proceeding chapters (Part A: Chapters 3–4) analyse the epistemic activities of women's organisations under authoritarianism during the Ben Ali period. Part B (Chapters 5–8) examines the post-Ben Ali period, tracing the activities of these organisations as independent epistemic communities and co-constitutive actors within a broader WSECoP during Tunisia's democratic transition and endeavoured consolidation.

The first chapter following the Introduction (Chapter 1) reviews the epistemic communities and CoPs literatures, critically assessing their evolution and limitations; and develops the conceptual framework of epistemic CoPs as adapted for my Tunisian context. Chapter 2 subsequently unpacks Ben Ali's authoritarian regime architecture, applying the framework of 'upgraded authoritarianism' (Heydemann 2007). The chapter disaggregates Ben Ali's state into four key power nodes, including reinterpreting Tunisian state feminism as a strategic tool of upgraded

authoritarianism. It sets the stage for later chapters by highlighting the instrumentalisation of women's rights in national and international legitimation strategies, providing a contextual analysis of women's security in Tunisia, and examining how legal, political, and social structures historically shaped – and constrained – women's security prior to the 2011 uprising.

Part A begins with Chapter 3's empirical analysis of UNFT as a state-aligned epistemic community, participating in an asymmetric epistemic CoP with the Benalist state by virtue of co-producing and legitimising Ben Ali's security discourses and embedding regime narratives into public discourse and international diplomacy. Despite existing as an independent organisation in its own right, UNFT also largely functioned as a regime transmission belt, helping shape state feminism's narrative of modernity and stability. Chapter 4 shifts focus to Tunisia's independent women's organisations, examining ATFD and AFTURD as epistemic communities operating under authoritarian constraint. It analyses their domestic work on GBV and equal inheritance as examples of counter-hegemonic knowledge production, alongside their transnational alliances whereby they contributed feminist expertise to international and regional networks.

Part B transitions to the post-Ben Ali landscape. It examines in Chapter 5 the WSECoP's pivotal role in Tunisia's 2011 uprising, followed by its contribution to critical legislative efforts during this period. The chapter argues that these women's organisations were not just engaged in advocacy, but were reshaping Tunisia's political and social narratives and wielding agenda-setting and pedagogical influence during a period of profound national redefinition. Chapter 6 deepens the analysis of the WSECoP's constitutional and pedagogical functions, focusing on efforts to shape the 2014 Constitution. It explores initiatives such as the 'Women's Constitution' and coalition-building efforts like *Hrayer Tounes*, showing how women's organisations combined expertise, education, and advocacy to produce civic, legal, and normative knowledge as epistemic custodians of Tunisia's democratic transition.

Chapter 7 revisits the theme of women's physical security introduced in Chapter 4, examining the WSECoP's post-transition role as a policy advocacy and reform facilitator through its contributions to Law 58 on GBV, the development of TAMKIN and Tanassof centres, and Aswat Nissa's engagement with the global Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. It shows how these women's organisations engaged in situated norm entrepreneurship, balancing grassroots mobilisation with institutional reform in an increasingly fragile political context. The final empirical chapter, Chapter 8, explores the WSECoP's work on women's economic security, analysing initiatives such as the Women's Political Academy, the AMAL project, and Jendouba Solidarity Centre. Despite structural limitations and current authoritarian resurgence under Kais Saied, Chapter 8 also foregrounds the WSECoP's strategic resilience, particularly through coalitions like *Dynamique Féministe*.

The Conclusion finally draws together the empirical and theoretical insights of the thesis to reaffirm its central argument: that Tunisian women's organisations, across both authoritarian and transitional political contexts, functioned as epistemic actors who helped shape the meaning and mechanisms of women's security. It also reflects upon how the epistemic CoPs framework developed here advances existing literature, and outlines directions for future research in other non-Western or politically constrained contexts.

Chapter 1: Reviewing Epistemic Communities and Communities of Practice

1.1 Introduction

The concept of 'epistemic communities' was introduced to IR by John Ruggie in the 1970s, who argued that institutionalisation, both domestically and internationally, was shaped not just by actors' behaviours, but also by "the epistemes through which political relationships are visualised" (Ruggie 1975:569). Drawing on social constructivism, Ruggie theorised that networks of actors sharing "a dominant way of looking at social reality, a set of shared symbols and references, mutual expectations, and a mutual predictability of intention" (Ibid), can occasion policy changes. Theorising upon these actors, which were defined as epistemic communities, laid the groundwork for analysing the *cognitive* dimension of international institutionalisation (Antoniades 2003:23, emphasis mine).

However, epistemic communities only gained prominence in policy literature when Peter M. Haas developed the concept into a positivist framework, to explain "decision-making instances characterized by technical complexity and uncertainty" (Dunlop 2011:2), particularly in international policy. Introducing epistemic communities as an observable framework, he defined them as knowledge-based 'communities of experts', generating policy-relevant understandings of esoteric issues (Haas 1992a:16). For Haas, expertise was the source of influence: "epistemic community members' prestige and reputation for expertise accord them access to the political system… their claims to knowledge serve as their primary social power resource" (Ibid:17).

Alternative definitions also arose, which whilst not refuting that epistemic communities constituted communities of experts, placed the onus on the purposes of these experts as opposed to their methods. Sebenius cast them as "a special kind of de facto natural coalition of believers whose main interest lies in…fostering the adoption of the community's policy project" (Sebenius 1992:325), whilst Stone viewed them as specialists looking to extend their beliefs into the public policy

domain (Stone 1996:87). Although this points towards the fact that no single definition of an 'epistemic community' exists in the literature, Haas' conception, along with most epistemic communities frameworks used by succeeding authors (see Adler and Haas 1992b; Ringius 1997; Antoniades 2003; Faleg 2012; Kourtelis 2021), invariably bring to the forefront the presence of shared normative beliefs, which must link together expert 'knowledge-based networks', in order to distinguish them from similar actors including interest groups, advocacy coalitions, and transnational networks (Antoniades 2003).

Accordingly, this chapter reviews the evolution of epistemic communities literature and situates my theoretical contribution within it. Whilst the concept has provided valuable tools for understanding how knowledge networks shape policymaking, its dominant positivist framing has constrained its analytical potential, particularly in non-Western and transitional contexts. My argument thus reclaims the constructivist roots of epistemic communities, first articulated by Ruggie and influenced by Foucault, and builds on recent efforts to integrate epistemic communities with CoPs (Adler and Faubert 2022). This offers a hybrid framework bridging the gap between knowledge utilisation and policymaking.

This framework also enables a practice-oriented, power-sensitive analysis of how Tunisian women's organisations act as epistemic agents in shaping women's security, offering fresh insight into how epistemic communities shape securitymaking. Building upon Kourtelis' innovations to the epistemic communities framework, particularly his emphasis on *external* scope factors, my approach additionally heeds Cross' (2013) hitherto unanswered call to study epistemic communities comparatively, and attend to their *internal* dynamics and characteristics. In this thesis, comparison is undertaken across two distinct temporal contexts — the Ben Ali era and the post-2011 period — to trace how the internal dynamics, characteristics, and epistemic functions of women's organisations evolved in response to shifting political and institutional environments.

The chapter charts the development of the epistemic communities debate across four main 'waves'. Wave one outlines the constructivist foundations established by

Ruggie and influenced by Foucault. Wave two examines Haas' positivist reformulation, which consolidated the framework but narrowed its scope. Wave three surveys critiques that problematised Haas' assumptions, highlighting the embedded, political, and contested nature of epistemic communities. Wave four explores empirical applications in security and Security Sector Reform (SSR), showing both the framework's utility and its limits.

1.2 Wave One: Constructivist Origins – Ruggie and the Foundations of Epistemic Communities

The first wave of theorising on epistemic communities was spearheaded by John Ruggie (1975, 1998), drawing on social constructivism, which emerged in the late twentieth century as a challenge to dominant rationalist and materialist approaches including neorealism and neoliberalism (Ruggie 1998:880) (see Appendix Table A2). By the 1980s, during IR's so-called 'Third Great Debate', constructivism had taken shape as a "reflectivist" approach (Keohane 1988), foregrounding how social and ideological factors influence global politics. Despite internal variation, the majority of constructivist works offered novel insights concerning the intersubjective bases of the discipline and the increasing significance of interdependence, as well as unconventionally treated "identities and interests as the dependent variable" (Wendt, 1992:394), bringing into question earlier 'truths' informing the general epistemology of IR (Haas 2015:3). This emphasis on norms, culture, and ideas represented a shift in IR, moving analysis beyond the state and toward the social forces that transform international relations (Keohane and Nye 1971).

Informed by his view of constructivism as "human consciousness and its role in international life" (Ruggie 1998:856), Ruggie introduced epistemic communities to IR, theorised as "interrelated roles which grow up around an *episteme*; they delimit, for their members, *the* proper construction of social reality" (Ruggie 1975:569-70). Their agential power in producing international policy change thus lay in the creation of discourse that engenders and sustains standards of "normal" behaviour (Ibid). Fleshed out in his 1975 article *International Responses to Technology: Concepts and Trends*, Ruggie's concept was grounded in constructionist philosopher Michel

Foucault's notion of 'episteme'. Foucault's *The Order of Things*, published in 1966, employed episteme as the epistemological sphere which shapes the conditions of possibility for knowledge within a specific time and space (O'Farrell 2005). This was premised upon the same holist ontology informing later constructivist thinking, "in which wholes cannot be reducible to interacting parts" (Jung 2019:4), viewing understandings of reality to be dependent upon knowledge, perspectives, and socially constructed value systems.

Following Foucault, Ruggie considered knowledge-based communities to be of political importance (Smirnova et al. 2015), but expanded upon Foucault's epistemic theory by generalizing the functioning of epistemic communities (Machon et al. 2018:3). For Ruggie, epistemic communities also played an important role in the *institutionalisation* of practices and procedures followed in international political settings, through contributing to the construction of social reality by accounting for the relationship between causes and consequences (Ibid). As he put it, "processes of institutionalisation involve not only the grid through which behaviour is acted out, but also the epistemes through which political relationships are visualised" (Ruggie 1975:569), operationalising Foucault's abstraction to explain how transnational knowledge networks shape policy (Faleg 2012:164).

After Ruggie's 1975 piece, with the exception of limited works by J.H. Marx and B. Holzner published in 1979 – which mainly elaborated upon Ruggie's definition to proclaim the importance of certain values and cultural standards to the existence of epistemic communities – the concept remained marginal in IR (Smirnova et al. 2015). Scholarly interest resurged only with Peter Haas' 1992 special edition of *IO*, widely seen as the "keystone" of the epistemic communities literature (Dunlop 2011:2).

1.3 Wave Two: Haas' Positivist Reformulation and Consolidation

The second wave of literature saw epistemic communities gain traction through Haas' reformulation in the early 1990s, embedding epistemic communities within a positivist research agenda. The Winter 1992 *IO* special edition shifted focus from *episteme* to *epistemic community*, defined as "the actors responsible for articulating

and aggregating knowledge-based understanding in areas of security, environment, and international political economy" (Haas 2015:3). Haas' (1992a) introduction to the collection advanced a new function for epistemic communities, contending that policymakers are more likely to consult epistemic communities during uncertain times. This was informed by his methodical classifying of epistemic communities as expert groups with their own understandings, which provide the opportunity for actors to better perceive and understand the context in which they operate (Haas 2015:2). Haas postulated that epistemic communities achieved this through a threestep mechanism, involving elucidating cause and effect relationships; shedding light on the complex interlinkages between issues; and helping define the self-interest of states (Haas 1992a:15). Distinctly aiming to produce systematic thinking on epistemic communities, Haas consequently organized the categorization and distinguishing of epistemic communities according to a technical framework, as groups of professional people from diverse backgrounds, able to produce knowledge for the purposes of policy building (Haas 1992a:8).

To systematise the role of epistemic communities in decision-making, Haas introduced four core 'knowledge elements' that constitute their belief systems and help assess their influence. This framework has since become the dominant approach in epistemic community scholarship (Smirnova et al. 2015), thus worth quoting at length here:

> [1] a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, which provide a value-based rationale for the social action of community members; [2] shared causal beliefs, which are derived from their analysis of practices…which then serve as the basis for elucidating the multiple linkages between possible policy actions and desired outcomes; [3] shared notions of validity… intersubjective, internally defined criteria for weighing and validating knowledge in the domain of their expertise; and [4] a common policy enterprise – that is, a set of common practices associated with a set of problems to which their professional competence is directed (Haas 1992a:3).

Haas argued that epistemic communities are distinguished from other actors, such as interest groups, social movements, and bureaucratic coalitions, by their shared causal beliefs, normative commitments, and a common policy enterprise (Ibid:18–19). Unlike broader scientific communities, epistemic communities possess a unified normative orientation, enabling them to shape policies in line with their favoured ideas. Framing them as 'experts' consulted during times of uncertainty, Haas saw their theoretical frameworks as contributing to the social construction of the world. Whilst influenced by constructivist thinking – particularly the notion that our understanding of the world is shaped by prior ideas – Haas maintained a "pragmatic constructivism" (Haas & Haas 2002:573), blending rationalist cost-benefit analysis with constructivist insights on identity, norms, and discourse. To that end, he positioned epistemic communities within a positivist research agenda, advocating methods such as process tracing, focused comparisons, and large-N statistical analysis to empirically trace their influence (Haas 2015:2).

Numerous scholars advancing the study of epistemic communities have adopted Haas' framework, which significantly stimulated empirical research on the concept (see Mendelson 1993; Antoniades 2003; McGivern 2010; Heritage & Green 2013). Its application in security studies has expanded focus to include the influence of 'knowledge-based networks' on security sector reform (SSR) in Western contexts (Faleg 2012; Phillipps 2018), the shaping of the European Neighbourhood Policy (Kourtelis 2021), and regional security and economic development (Dosch 2008). These developments stem in part from two seminal articles in Haas' 1992 *IO* volume – Adler and Haas' study on banning chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), and Adler's work on nuclear arms control – which helped legitimise the use of epistemic communities in security research (Smirnova et al. 2015). Reviewing these contributions is essential before examining more recent attempts to revise Haas' theory in the security field.

Adler and Haas' (1992a) study on banning CFCs advanced the then-emerging field of environmental security by showing how NASA scientists, University of Michigan physicists, and the U.S. National Bureau of Standards – seen as the first epistemic

community consultation on the issue (Roan 1989) – successfully mobilised international support for the 1987 Montreal Protocol regulating a $100 billion industry, despite inconclusive data. This shift was attributed to “the activities of an ecological epistemic community” (Adler and Haas 1992s:188), which advanced shared policy goals, disseminated information calling for strict CFC controls, and urged swift implementation. Amidst “imperfect knowledge” (Ibid:191), this community became “the only competent scientific group” capable of interpreting uncertainty in the policy process (Ibid:223).

Similarly, Adler’s (1992) study on nuclear arms control showed how shared conceptual understandings amongst scientists and military officials enabled a U.S. epistemic community to influence the 1972 U.S.-USSR anti-ballistic missile (ABM) treaty. U.S. policymakers depended on this community’s expertise on nuclear spillover and complex technical issues, which was able to successfully frame arms control as a national interest, underscoring the powerful role epistemic communities can play in shaping government policy (Ibid:145).

Together, these studies challenged realist assumptions that security policy derives solely from shifts in power or high politics, underscoring instead the epistemic role of scientific knowledge, shared ideas, and domestic politics in shaping international outcomes. Their early empirical tests illustrated how epistemic communities reduce uncertainty, clarify state preferences, and transform expert principles into binding policy frameworks.

Other contributors to the 1992 edition also extended Haas’ framework to areas such as trade and economic policy, evidencing the presence and influence of epistemic communities in policymaking (Cross 2013). For example, Drake and Nicolaidis (1992) explored how a community of services experts persuaded governments to include “trade in services” in the GATT negotiations during the 1970s and 1980s, institutionalising new ideas and reframing state preferences despite initial resistance.

Nonetheless, despite the importance of this early work for giving currency to research on epistemic communities, numerous challenges emerged from later epistemic communities scholars, who questioned Haas' definition of the concept, and criticised him for failing to explore how epistemic communities emerge influential in the first place.

1.3.1 Wave Three: Critical Revisions and Challenges to Haas

Whilst Haas' epistemic communities framework enriched understandings of international politics, a third wave of scholarship emerged in the late 1990s and 2000s that critically reassessed his framework. These critiques problematised his assumptions about expertise, influence, and knowledge, arguing that epistemic communities are embedded in political contexts, shaped by bargaining, alliances, and power relations, rather than autonomous technocratic enclaves. This wave also broadened the analytical lens by questioning who counts as an "expert", how knowledge gains legitimacy, and how epistemic communities interact with wider socio-political structures (see Appendix Table A3 for an overview of key theoretical contributions).

For example, Sebenius (1992) argues that Haas overlooks the political environment shaping epistemic communities' success, contending that their influence often stems more from strategic positioning than from authoritative expertise. Similarly, Dunlop (2000) and Cross (2013) highlight the political activism and bargaining in which epistemic communities engage, suggesting they operate like other policy actors. This points to the need to examine their varying relationships with political elites and the different levels of power they may hold, which Chapters 3 to 8 of this thesis consider. Antoniades (2003) reinforces this by urging a shift in focus from the cognitive to the policy level, framing epistemic communities as embedded in multilevel policy games. Zito (2001b) shows how Northern European epistemic communities gained traction on ecological issues not simply due to their knowledge, but because of backing from Scandinavian politicians. Thus, while shared beliefs and goals remain essential in granting epistemic communities access to decision-making, their actual influence often depends on political alliances.

A second category of criticism of Haas' epistemic communities framework also concerns his uncritical approach to explaining the influence of epistemic communities. This critique, put forwards by authors such as Finnemore (1998), Dunlop (2000), and Lidskog and Sundqvist (2002), calls into question the relationship between the scientific and technical expertise wielded by epistemic communities – which is theorised by Haas (1992a) as the key to rationalising the reliance of policymakers on epistemic communities – and its effect on their decisionmaking authority. Dunlop (2000) provides a general critique of Haas' framework, which she regards as too indeterminate regarding which of the bases for epistemic community influence is most crucial for their preferences, arguing that "Haas does not explicitly single out any one feature as representing the deep core of the community's belief system" (Ibid:142). Lidskog and Sundqvist (2002) narrow in on Haas' treatment of scientific knowledge, claiming that the influence of epistemic communities "cannot be satisfactorily explained by the internal qualities of scientific knowledge or by the epistemic community alone" (Ibid:85). Rather, they espoused a deconstruction of the influence of epistemic communities, determining that their scientific knowledge first "needs to be adapted to the social and political order to be influential and to acquire the social authority for being policy-relevant" (Ibid:86). This rendered Haas' judgment that the consensual knowledge of epistemic communities can be directly applied in policy processes due to its technocratic, and thus objective, nature, as erroneous and misleading, failing to critically analyse the contingency and variety of scientific knowledge. Indeed, as these authors recognised, "science-based issues… are always the result of a social order, political negotiations, and scientific practices" (Ibid:94).

1.4 Wave Four: Empirical Applications in Security and SSR

A fourth wave of scholarship emerging in the early 2010s applied the epistemic communities framework to concrete cases, particularly in security and transitional contexts. Much of this work focused on SSR, highlighting how epistemic communities interact with uncertainty, complexity, and the interplay of local and international expertise. These empirical studies demonstrated both the utility of the framework, and its limitations when applied beyond Western policy settings.

As Cross notes, “the epistemic communities research programme has fallen short of its promise…subsequent works on the topic have been few and far between…and have applied the concept somewhat narrowly to single cases” (Cross 2013:143). This limitation is apparent in the efforts of these ‘fourth wave’ authors, although it also characterises the concept’s use in environmental politics, political economy, and diplomacy. As in earlier applications, the security-focused literature affirms that epistemic communities are most influential when policymakers seek to fill knowledge gaps, and when issues are highly technical or scientific (Ibid:144). However, recent scholarship also attempts to go further, identifying what makes certain epistemic communities more persuasive, why their ideas gain traction, and how governments decide amongst competing policy recommendations.

1.4.1 Epistemic Communities and SSR

With growing concerns over state institutions’ ability to ensure citizen security, both developing and developed countries have increasingly prioritised SSR, which seeks to direct public resources toward public safety (Fluri and Hadzic 2004:7). IR scholars have examined SSR from diverse perspectives, including foreign policy (Wulf 2011), gender (Salahub and Nerland 2010), human rights (Galletti and Wodzicki 2010), and critical theory (Bellamy 2010). Given that SSR commonly unfolds amidst complex transitions, the epistemic communities framework found renewed relevance in this field (Kartas 2014). As a result, recent security-related epistemic community research has focused on SSR as a policymaking space “produced through knowledge formation based on social interaction between multiple actors” (Phillipps 2018:283).

The epistemic communities literature shows how expert networks have shaped SSR across varied contexts, focusing on the interplay between state decisionmakers, the groups they ‘recognise’ as specialists, and international organisations. For example, defining an epistemic community as “a network of professionals with recognised expertise…in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge” (Ibid:284), Phillipps examines SSR in Kosovo via interactions amongst local think tanks, media, international practitioners, and Balkan officials, identifying

these actors' "critical function of policy-relevant expertise" (Ibid:286), and their tactical collaborations, as constitutive of an epistemic community. Phillipps demonstrates how local knowledge successfully played a part in formulating Kosovo's SSR, as an authentic challenge to "the ways in which international policy-makers form knowledge on topics of SSR" (Ibid). However, at the same time, he posits that local knowledge can also powerfully impact international SSR workers, thus classified by Phillipps as "a site of both local challenge and international learning" (Ibid). For example, in the late 2000s post-independence period, Kosovo's government rejected an imposed international security strategy, instituting a new internal review process in alliance with its approved think tanks and CSOs, developing a revised 'local' document (Ibid, Sahin 2017:23). This supports Haas' view that "decision-makers may turn to specialists to ameliorate the uncertainties and help them understand the current issues and anticipate future trends" (Phillipps 2018:292), enhancing our understanding of the production of security and knowledge in post-independence or transition states.

Discussing SSR within the EU's security architecture, Faleg (2012) similarly underscores the networked nature of policymaking, highlighting cooperation and knowledge-sharing across organisations and governments. Faleg attempts to theoretically account for the integration of SSR norms into the EU security architecture, investigating the role of epistemic communities in promoting the underlying good governance agenda of the EU's SSR (Faleg 2012:161). He argues that these communities advanced new thinking within the CSDP, rooted in human security and linking security, development, and governance, reflecting a shift in shared causal beliefs in the 1990s (Ibid:166). In this way, hearkening back to Ruggie's formulation, Faleg's framework explicitly invokes the complex interaction between ideas and interests, singled out as the place of the "institutionalisation of SSR" (Ibid, emphasis mine), unlike Phillipps, who downplays SSR norms in institutionalisation. Further, Faleg disaggregates the concept of epistemic learning to provide a deeper consideration of the relationship between members of transnational epistemic communities. He maintains that in the EU context, epistemic learning is firstly collective – following Adler and Haas to claim that "bureaucratic entities and

organisations can learn through socialisation processes" (Ibid); secondly consensual/networked – employing similar thinking to Phillipps concerning the significance of "the creation of transnational networks sharing the same principles and causal beliefs, and the interaction within these networks" (Ibid) to the permeation of technical knowledge; and thirdly constrained – considering the limits to epistemic community influence from political, cultural, and bureaucratic constraints (Ibid). Through such learning, he identifies three flourishing epistemic communities in 1990s Europe: security, development, and governance (Ibid:167-169), *resulting* in the EU's increased "focus on SSR as part of its foreign-security policy interface" (Ibid:171). Faleg demonstrates that this was true even practically, with the EU relying on training, education, and networking to promote transnational understanding of SSR issues since the early 2000s, with its security-goodgovernance-development paradigm coming to be one of the main components justifying EU missions.

Although moving away from the exclusive focus on SSR, Kourtelis (2021) also chooses to develop the literature on epistemic communities through the study of Europe, discussing the function of expert knowledge in constituting the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Similar to the works reviewed above, Kourtelis (2021) argues that epistemic communities have provided crucial expertise for the construction of the ENP, recognising that decision-makers rely upon the input of experts during periods of epistemic uncertainty (Ibid:1). However, Kourtelis valuably offers the qualification that "the way that authorities use knowledge varies and is contingent" (Ibid:2), going one step beyond Faleg (2012) to explain not only how policies advance gradually, but also "what type of knowledge shows up in policy outcomes and how it is used by policymakers" (Ibid). In this way, Kourtelis reveals the multifarious use of knowledge in given policy areas, given their numerous features.

Kourtelis' framework expands upon the functions of policy knowledge, arguing that the knowledge of epistemic communities exhibits itself in three different forms for policymakers – namely political/symbolic, instrumental, and conceptual knowledge (Ibid). He studies the role played by these different knowledge forms in the two key

ENP areas of anti-corruption measures in the Eastern partners, and rural development in the south rim of the ENP. Kourtelis reveals how, oftentimes in these contexts, “policymakers use knowledge to inform decisionmaking or for terminating programmes…advancing an agenda of which the aims are already decided by policymakers” (Ibid:4), which is what he terms political/symbolic knowledge, evidenced for example during the EU’s Common Fisheries Policy, when epistemic communities were used by policymakers as a channel for public relations to bolster their preferences for fishery management through expert knowledge (Ibid). In order to provide direction to policy, Kourtelis also posits that EU politicians have employed instrumental knowledge, whereby “policymakers inform epistemic communities about the aims of their agenda, whilst the latter provide technical knowledge about related matters” (Ibid:5). Finally, Kourtelis views conceptual knowledge as the highest level of knowledge, differentiating it from instrumental knowledge to the extent that “it is used for the redefinition of common problems, whereas instrumental knowledge is used for…improvements” (Ibid). Thus, contrastingly to the works reviewed above which take the production of knowledge for granted, Kourtelis’ differentiation of knowledge forms highlights how distinct scope factors have varying impact on the use of such knowledge itself.

1.5 A Theoretical Typology of Epistemic CoPs

As noted in the introduction and discussed above, several shortcomings in the current epistemic communities literature have stalled its development and limited its utility. These include Cross’ observation – two decades years after Haas’ 1992 publication – that its sporadic application in isolated case studies has limited the evolution of the conceptualisation of epistemic communities, instead of “undertaking the broader comparative work that might reveal something new about the nature of epistemic community influence” (Ibid:150). Heeding such instruction, my research traces the evolution and influence of certain epistemic communities across both authoritarian and post-2011 transitional contexts in Tunisia, offering a more dynamic and practice-oriented understanding of epistemic communities operate over time. To my knowledge, this is the first study to examine epistemic communities through this longitudinal and comparative lens.

The comparative focus of my research also considers it imperative to adopt a broader stance on uncertainty – the factor most often cited by scholars as the key factor prompting policymakers to turn to epistemic communities. As Haas argues, epistemic communities "play an important role under conditions of complexity and uncertainty, in providing information to decision makers that helps them to articulate an understanding…of their own policies and interests" (Haas 2015:1). Whilst not dismissing uncertainty's relevance, my research challenges the notion that it arises only during crises or that "new ideas will be solicited and selected only after crises" (Haas 2001:11581). In line with Cross, "uncertainty is actually a built-in and nearly constant feature of the international system" (Cross 2013:151). The constructivist tradition views international relations "as a setting of complexity and uncertainty" (Haas 2015:6), and realworld cases – such as debates over climate change – reveal uncertainty even in areas typically deemed settled. Therefore, rather than locating epistemic community influence solely in critical junctures, "it is more likely that when epistemic communities exist, they are always at work" (Cross 2013:151), and like a regime continually constitute and re-constitute the nature of policy choices and norms. Although uncertainty does often produce epistemic community influence, "the *degree* of uncertainty does not necessarily correlate with the likelihood of epistemic community impact" (Ibid). Embracing a broader interpretation of uncertainty thus allows for a more nuanced understanding of how epistemic communities shape policy under both uncertain and seemingly stable conditions.

Beyond examining the overarching *external* role played by epistemic communities, it is also necessary for the creation of a robust comparative typology for it to comprise the study of their *internal* dynamics and characteristics. Although the framework elucidated by Kourtelis (2021) and reviewed above provided a useful innovation to the foregoing epistemic communities literature, by explaining how expert knowledge is used by policymakers at different junctures, and its impact on policy outcomes, and must be similarly incorporated in my research framework in order to provide a multidimensional study capturing how various scope factors distinctly impact the use of knowledge, Kourtelis and others have omitted what I consider to be a vital research step. For the purposes of providing a framework which re-visions research

on epistemic communities and enables a more complete grasp of the nature of their influence, prior to explaining how knowledge is used by policymakers, it is exceedingly beneficial to first probe what types of knowledge and from which sources show up in front of policymakers. It is vital to gain a deeper understanding of the characteristics of distinctive epistemic communities, then also enabling an assessment of their successes and failures. This is in contrast to the solely elite-focused frameworks of Kourtelis, Faleg, and others, who fail to adequately deal with the epistemic communities themselves as wholly-political bodies to be politically researched. Indeed, as stated by Dunlop (2012), it is rare to come across research "whereby the community itself is…the centre of analytical attention" (Dunlop 2012:5).

In the Tunisian context, in order to enhance our understanding of the creation of women's security, it is also productive to analyse the idiosyncratic insecurities, individual manoeuvrings in achieving security-related goals, and knowledgeconstruction legitimacy of epistemic communities. I believe that this will help move us back towards the original conception of epistemic communities theorised by Ruggie, which significantly considered knowledge-based communities to be of *political* importance, reclaiming epistemic communities as political communities.

The intensely collaborative nature of the work of the majority of Tunisian epistemic communities under-study also necessitates equipping my research with the tools and insights provided by the CoPs literature, espousing a theoretical framework premised upon thinking in terms of 'epistemic communities *of practice'* (Adler and Faubert 2022). The CoPs literature is deeply influenced by critical social constructivism, significant for various reasons. Cross (2013) calls for a focus on constructivism, which she argues "provides valuable insight into…the internal cohesion of epistemic communities" (Cross 2013:149). As an approach theorising the connection between power and knowledge, and interrogating how certain groups and institutions in societies become recognised as proprietors of knowledge, critical constructivism is analytically capable of facilitating the investigation of the power dynamics that configure the experiences of epistemic communities, measuring the

results of the plethora of their views concerning the constitution of security and the actions they take toward security-making in light of these (Das 2009).

An additional motivation for analytically employing CoPs insights also lies in its ability to reveal how so-called expert knowledge is socially constructed, as well as enable the problematisation of the construing of 'epistemic communities' with 'expert communities', out of which two principal issues emerge. Firstly, as the epistemic communities literature was developed, the study of 'experts' became the study of scientists, following Ernst Haas' argument that epistemic communities "operate only in fields where science matters…in the field of human rights…there are no epistemic communities" (Interview with Ernst Haas, UC Berkeley Institute of International Studies, 2000). However, as perceived by Cross (2013), "there is no reason to assume that actors with non-scientific expert knowledge cannot be just as persuasive, and operate according to the same or similar criteria" (Cross 2013:155). This is because, as critical constructivist tools help demonstrate, "authoritative knowledge is a product of social context" (Antoniades 2003:27), with "each and every spacio-temporal-specific knowledge structure defining what is knowledge" (Ibid), revealing the importance of interrogating the knowledge structures within which expert claims to knowledge are located, as opposed to solely the content of these claims (Ibid). Once we recognise that science does not possess unaffected power, but rather is accorded such power by various institutions and actors, nonscientific expert knowledge can come to be seen as equally, or even exceedingly, influential compared to its scientific counterpart (Cross 2013:148).

By widening the definition of 'experts', including crucially with respect to human security issues, scholars such as Cross and Antoniades have enabled us to explore the role of epistemic communities in diverse political and cultural contexts. I aim to take this useful literature one step further by questioning the underlying assumptions about who is recognised as an 'expert'. In transnational contexts, these have often been set by those who claim to speak on behalf of civil society members, activists, and local NGOs. Whilst epistemic communities are distinct actors, they also operate in dynamic environments, impacted by the tensions between Western and

nonWestern conceptions of experts, North/ South relations, and hierarchical sociopolitical structures.

This dynamic of inequality is more adequately addressed through embracing insights from the CoPs framework, which allows for a more context-sensitive understanding of how expertise is constructed and recognised. Chapter 5 of this thesis makes this particularly apparent by showing how, in authoritarian and hierarchical contexts like Ben Ali's Tunisia, it is often the state that anoints certain groups as 'experts'. By embedding epistemic communities within the sociopolitical realities of power and practice, the CoPs approach – whose focal point is knowledge, power, and practice (Adler and Faubert 2022:47) – thusly foregrounds the contingent and negotiated nature of expertise. Architects of the CoPs approach, which include Emmanuel Haas, Michael Faubert, Alena Drieschova, and Christian Beuger, conceive of it as a "practice-oriented programme on epistemic communities…exploring practices not only as enacted by agency but also as being intertwined with social structures or 'epistemes'" (Ibid:48; Ruggie 1975). Contrastingly to both the mainstream and critical epistemic communities literatures, thinking in terms of CoPs "promises to change the focus from scientific and non-scientific 'ideas' that people 'possess' in their minds to knowledge that is practiced" (Adler and Faubert 2022:48). This crucially brings culture into play – undoubtedly central to a study focused upon the construction and transformation of certain social realities, helping us recognise that culture is not exclusively in people's minds, and neither is it solely located in discourse. Rather, it is also found "in the very performance of practices…it is bound up in performances and can only be expressed as such" (Ibid:50). Defining practices as the socially significant patterns of interaction which at the same time produce, encompass, and potentially reify knowledge and discourse concerning the material world (Ibid:51), following CoPs, would thus allow us to deconstruct the particular actions that organize the social world (Ibid:52).

It is thus essential to consider how the CoPs framework has evolved within the literature, in order to ground its analytical relevance for this thesis.

1.5.1 The CoPs Literature

The CoPs concept was first introduced by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in their seminal work, “Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation” (1991). Emerging from a critical engagement with traditional cognitive theories of learning, their approach was deeply rooted in anthropological observation and social constructivist epistemologies. These authors argued that “learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners” (Lave and Wenger 1991:29), viewing learning not as an isolated cognitive activity, but a socially-embedded process taking place through active participation in communal practices. Their formulation of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Ibid) captured how newcomers are gradually socialized into a community by initially engaging in simpler, low-risk tasks and progressively moving toward full participation. This framework challenged prevailing models that divorced knowledge acquisition from context, instead emphasising that meaning, identity, and knowledge are co-constructed through participation in socially and historically-situated practices.

Despite its conceptual innovation, this original formulation of CoPs has been criticised for its relatively underdeveloped treatment of institutional structures, power relations, and conflict (see Cox 2005; Roberts 2006; Gherardi 2009, 2016; Farnsworth, Kleanthous, and Wenger-Trayner 2016; Bicchi 2023). The idea of seamless integration through apprenticeship appeared overly harmonious and insufficiently attentive to hierarchies, exclusions, and the contested nature of practice; criticisms true even of Wenger’s expanded theoretical scope in his subsequent monograph, “Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity” (1998). This work situated CoPs more explicitly within organisational learning and identity formation, introducing the now-canonical triad of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Wenger deepened the ontological and epistemological foundations of CoPs theory by proposing that learning is not merely situated, but also constitutive of identity. Participation in a CoP, in this sense, is a process of becoming—an iterative negotiation of meaning, belonging, and practice. However, Wenger’s model still drew criticism for its tendency to idealise CoPs and

under-theorise conflict, resistance, and the effects of broader institutional and sociopolitical structures.

In response, the early 2000s witnessed a flourishing of scholarship that critically extended CoPs theory (see Appendix Table A3). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder's "Cultivating Communities of Practice" (2002) offered more practical guidance for organisations, reflecting a shift toward managerial applications of the concept. At the same time, scholars such as Hildreth and Kimble (2004) explored virtual CoPs, whilst Gherardi (2009) – drawing on feminist and practice-based theory – critiqued the overly functionalist tone of CoPs applications and emphasised the embodied, contested, and gendered nature of practice. These developments aligned CoPs theory with more explicitly critical social constructivist frameworks, incorporating questions of power, resistance, and marginalisation into the analysis of how communities form and sustain themselves.

A significant reorientation of the CoPs literature was also recently advanced by Federica Bicchi (2023), who reframed the debate on CoPs formation by arguing for the ontological primacy of practice. Drawing on critical constructivist insights from IR and organisational theory, Bicchi critiqued both the interpretative view of CoPs as organic, and the managerial view of CoPs as engineered. Instead, she argued that CoPs emerge from foundational practices, and only when these practices are aligned amongst participants can a community genuinely coalesce. This emphasis on practice as both ontologically and epistemologically prior to the community challenged institutional attempts to cultivate CoPs without attending to the social fabric of everyday doing. Bicchi's intervention resonates with the work of Gherardi and Nicolini, who likewise contend that practice – not organisation or policy – must be the analytical starting point for understanding how knowledge and community are generated. Bicchi's emphasis on alignment of practices and the embodied, performative nature of community formation arguably marks a return to and deepening of the original theoretical commitments of CoPs, but with a more critical and nuanced understanding of power, temporality, and institutional constraints. Her critique aligns closely with critical social constructivism, which emphasises not just

the social construction of knowledge, but also the mechanisms of inclusion, exclusion, and legitimation that shape how communities and knowledge claims are constituted.

My thesis aligns with this emerging strand of CoPs literature by foregrounding the role of practice in shaping epistemic communities, particularly within feminist and women-focused CSOs in Tunisia. Informed by Bicchi's research, it is asserted that CoPs are not simply the by-product of institutional design, but arise from the collective, embodied engagement of actors within a shared field of practice. However, my thesis also draws on Lave and Wenger's original concept of legitimate peripheral participation to trace how newcomers in these CoPs – for example, the organisations created post-2011 in Tunisia – are socialised into particular epistemic and political norms through everyday participation. Thus, whilst my work echoes the critical constructivist emphasis on practice and agency, it retains a foundational connection to the participatory learning processes articulated in early CoPs theory.

Contemporary scholarship on CoPs continues to expand in both theoretical depth and empirical application. Recent works by Banerjee and MacKay (2020), Schulte, Andresen, and Koller (2020), Sondarjee (2021), and Hofius (2023) have examined CoPs in varied institutional and geopolitical contexts, highlighting their role in shaping professional identities, knowledge politics, and policy outcomes. Increasingly, the literature incorporates intersectional, feminist, and decolonial perspectives to interrogate how CoPs are constituted, who gets to participate, and whose knowledge is validated. Scholars are also turning to mixed-methods approaches and network analyses to map the relational dynamics within CoPs and between overlapping communities, adding further complexity to our understanding of learning, power, and social organisation. In sum, CoPs theory has evolved from its anthropological and learning-theory roots into a rich, interdisciplinary field shaped by critical social constructivist insights. As the literature continues to diversify, it offers a robust framework for analysing how knowledge, identity, and community emerge through practice – a framework that my thesis engages with to explore feminist activism and epistemic authority across significant epochs in Tunisia.

Significantly, theorising on CoPs provides us with an actor-focused empirical framework, which draws our attention to how practices are contained in and conveyed by diverse CoPs assemblages, including epistemic communities (Adler and Faubert 2022:52). Relevant to our purposes of exploring embedded security practices, which come about after these communities "dissipate their collective understandings beyond their original boundaries and, via social and political processes, lead to their selective retention and institutionalization" (Ibid). Importantly, this perspective broadens the range of sites through which political phenomena can be analysed, including local cultures, knowledges, and interactions. It allows my framework to combine a 'bottom-up' approach, centred on the conventions, experiences, and methods of local actors in Tunisia, with a 'top-down' perspective attentive to North–South governmentality practices and asymmetrical power relations. In the context of security, this follows a long sociological tradition of attempting to recognise "the agential power of the researched in the construction of knowledge of human security, as well as providing insights into the complexity of lived experiences of insecurity" (Kostovicova et al. 2012:571, in Smith 2013:47).

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has critically traced the evolution of the debate on epistemic communities from its original formulation by Ruggie, rooted in constructivist thinking and the notion of socially constructed epistemes, to its reconfiguration by Haas as a more positivist, expert-driven model designed for empirical policy analysis. Whilst Haas' framework has provided a valuable point of departure for understanding the role of knowledge networks in international policymaking, particularly under conditions of uncertainty, it has also constrained the conceptual potential of epistemic communities by privileging scientific expertise, overlooking power dynamics, and remaining largely state- and elite-centric. Building on this critique, the chapter has demonstrated that to make epistemic communities analytically useful for studying the politics of security, especially in non-Western or transitional contexts such as Tunisia, a significant theoretical reorientation is necessary. Existing literature has tended to isolate epistemic communities as depoliticised expert enclaves,

neglecting their embeddedness in wider socio-political structures, their internal diversity, and the contested processes through which certain actors come to be recognised as knowledge authorities. This is particularly problematic for studying the production of women's security, where the actors involved do not fit neatly into conventional categories of scientific or technocratic expertise.

To address these limitations, this chapter has proposed a revised framework grounded in the original constructivist impulses of Ruggie and enriched by the CoPs literature. This approach allows for a more practice-oriented and powersensitive analysis of epistemic communities – one that acknowledges how knowledge is performed, legitimised, and institutionalised through everyday interactions and socio-political struggles. It also makes visible the influence of historically contingent hierarchies, including those tied to coloniality, gender, and regional inequalities, which shape who is heard and who is silenced in securitycreation. The theoretical *'epistemic communities of practice'* typology also better captures the complexity of knowledge production, circulation, and contestation in the realm of women's security in Tunisia. These revisions, which Chapters 3 through 8 develops and applies, mark a significant departure from existing literature and offer new conceptual tools for understanding how Tunisian women's organisations navigate, influence, and resist dominant security discourses. In doing so, this thesis also repositions epistemic communities not as peripheral technocratic actors, but as central agents in the ongoing reconfiguration of global and local security-creation practices.

Chapter 2: State Feminism and Authoritarian Upgrading under Ben Ali

2.1 Introduction

Scholarship on Ben Ali's regime (1987 – 2011) – alongside broader public perception – has characterised it as amongst the Arab world's most repressive, marked by pervasive surveillance, police brutality, and presidential hyper-centralisation (see Erdle 2010; Jebnoun 2013; Lutterbeck 2015). Whilst accurate, this view alone misses how authoritarian control was constructed and sustained by Ben Ali. This chapter instead reads Ben Ali's Tunisia through Heydemann's (2007) *upgraded authoritarianism* framework, which examines how authoritarian elites maintain power by adopting hollow political and economic reforms for self-preservation. Ben Ali deepened executive control and reshaped Tunisia into a security state, whilst simultaneously deploying reformist rhetoric, rather than ruling through brute force alone. This was achieved through technocratic reform, economic liberalisation, curated civil society engagement, and strategic use of rights-based discourses – a 'System Ben Ali' (Erdle 2010) masking repression with modernisation and consolidated personal rule, eventually and paradoxically sowing the seeds of its own collapse.

Within this broader system, one understudied element, central to this thesis' purposes, exemplifies this Benalist strategy: *state feminism*. Throughout this thesis and in the below, I use "state feminism" to mean the state's top-down appropriation and management of women's rights – via law, bureaucracies, funding, and symbolic representation – to produce authorised knowledge about women, project modernity at home and abroad, and co-opt independent feminist actors; in short, a regimeserving technology of governance rather than a collaborative equality project. Whilst existing analyses, including those by Laura Brand (1998) and Loes Debuysere
(2016), have interrogated the cultural constructions and discursive contours of Ben Ali's gender politics, they have not systematically integrated this phenomenon into the study of regime consolidation. Here, I argue that by monopolising knowledge production on women and institutionalising a state-aligned feminist discourse, the

regime strategically claimed moral legitimacy, neutralised oppositional feminist narratives, and governed women's security not as a matter of rights, but as a function of state control. In this sense, state feminism under Ben Ali was not dissimilar to the police or intelligence services: as a tool of *epistemic control* within a broader framework of authoritarian upgrading, it functioned to survey, discipline, and ideologically manage women's roles in society.

Whilst Western conceptualisations typically frame state feminism as collaborative state efforts to promote gender equality through policy and institutional mechanisms (see Kantola & Squires 2012), Tunisia's model took a different form. From its origins under Bourguiba, state feminism was embedded within a postcolonial modernist nation-building project, and deeply entangled within the construction of *Tunisianité* – a secular nationalist ethos linking women's emancipation to the authority and legitimacy of the modern state (Debuysere 2016). Under Ben Ali, this model was inherited, intensified, and reengineered as a strategic instrument of authoritarian upgrading. Women's rights were mobilised not only to project an image of progressiveness abroad and at home but to contain opposition, consolidate elite power, and monopolise narratives surrounding gender and modernity. The result was a regime-defined vision of *la Femme Tunisienne* ('the Tunisian woman') – "a modern, professional, and often highly educated Tunisian woman of middle and higher social classes" (Debuysere 2016:203) – deployed both symbolically and institutionally to reinforce the state's ideological dominance.

This analysis speaks directly to Sadiki's (2015) contention that "the reproduction of power through management of knowledge practices and production, including the cultural sphere, is scantily addressed in the field of scholarship on Arab and North African states" (Ibid:703). As he observes, hierarchies produced through state control over culture, education, and ideology can prove as enduring as those forged through military or economic means. By foregrounding the regime's strategic deployment of gender discourse and institutionalised feminism, this chapter seeks to fill a critical gap in the study of Ben Ali's Tunisia, reframing state feminism not as a policy achievement in isolation, but as a central component of authoritarian rule.

To develop this argument, the chapter proceeds in three parts. First, it maps the institutional and ideological architecture of authoritarian upgrading under Ben Ali, showing how presidential hyper-centralisation, the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD), security services, kinship/economic networks, and international partnerships were recalibrated to entrench control. Second, it examines state feminism – its evolution, agencies, and discourse – arguing that gender policy was not a mere legacy of state patriarchy but a reengineered strategy of epistemic and political domination with direct implications for the Tunisian women's organisations analysed in later chapters. By applying this framework – *for the first time in a systematic way to the Ben Ali era* – I offer an original contribution to scholarship on authoritarianism in the MENA region. Finally, the chapter accounts for the regime's end, demonstrating how the very mechanisms that sustained Ben Ali also produced brittleness within ruling coalitions, making implosion from within as consequential as popular mobilisation.

2.2 Mechanisms of Authoritarian Upgrading under Ben Ali

To understand the political and institutional context within which state-led gender strategies were developed and deployed, this section sketches the governance architecture of Ben Ali's Tunisia through the lens of *upgraded authoritarianism* (Heydemann 2007). This framework shifts attention from coercion alone to strategic transformation, marked by the selective adoption of liberalising reforms, the diversification of state-society relations, and the deployment of new modes of technocratic governance that strengthen the state's grip on power (Cavatorta & Haugbølle 2012).

From 1987 to 2011, Tunisia became a security-oriented, hyper-presidential system that fused repression with market opening, elite co-optation, and curated civic participation – an adaptive order recast as progress rather than a static dictatorship. This section outlines the key institutional and discursive elements of this upgraded authoritarian model: the expansion of presidential power, the centralisation of the ruling party, the consolidation of the security services, the management of economic privilege, the regulation of civil society, and the strategic cultivation of international legitimacy (Wolf 2023).

2.2.1 Presidential Hyper-Centralisation and Technocratic Rule

A hallmark of Ben Ali's upgraded authoritarianism was the systematic concentration of power in the presidency, which came to eclipse all other branches of government, in both symbolic and operational terms. Through constitutional amendments and institutional reengineering, Ben Ali eliminated term limits, removed potential checks and balances, and constructed a political system in which all lines of authority ultimately traced back to the presidential palace (Jebnoun 2013:107). The image of Ben Ali as a disciplined, technocratic reformer – cultivated early in his rule – was not incidental, but part of a deliberate political aesthetic that allowed the regime to distinguish itself from its postcolonial predecessors. By adopting the language of modernisation and bureaucratic rationality, the presidency came to embody not only the locus of power, but also the supposed engine of national progress. For instance, the 2008 constitutional amendment – presented as enhancing electoral competitiveness – was designed to block independent opposition candidates from the Democratic Progressive Party (Ibid:107). Such reforms were neither a return to classic autocracy nor mere survival of old institutions, but a strategic reinvention of authoritarianism cloaked in legal and technocratic language.

This hyper-presidentialism was also not merely about formal power; it extended into the symbolic economy of governance. Presidential speeches, directives, and "initiatives" functioned as both policy instruments and ideological texts, saturating public discourse with the language of reform, stability, and national unity (Erdle 2010:144). The centralisation of policy-making also enabled the presidency to directly control strategic sectors such as education, media, telecommunications, and women's affairs – areas where symbolic performance was as important as material outcomes (Ibid). Technocracy, in this context, did not signify neutrality, but the professionalisation of authoritarian control.

2.2.2 The RCD as Party-State Infrastructure

According to Heydemann, a core feature of authoritarian upgrading is the hollowing out of political parties to prevent them from becoming autonomous power centres (Heydemann 2007:5). Parallel to the presidency, the ruling party – the RCD – operated not as an autonomous political organisation, but as an extension of the

state apparatus (Erdle 2010:101). The RCD's omnipresence in Tunisian life reflected its dual function: it acted both as a disciplinary mechanism and a conduit for the distribution of state patronage (Lutterbeck 2015:824). Membership in the party became effectively mandatory for access to administrative positions, professional advancement, and economic opportunity. This embeddedness was particularly acute in the civil service, the education system, and regional development councils, where RCD officials mediated between the state and the population in ways that reproduced regime authority (Jebnoun 2013:110).

Crucially, the RCD's structure mirrored that of the state, extending its reach into the most localised levels of governance through its "popular committees" and neighbourhood cells (Lutterbeck 2015:824). These structures enabled the party to mobilise support, monitor dissent, and frame the regime's policies as expressions of national consensus. Rather than monopolising power through ideological rigidity, the RCD absorbed and repackaged local grievances and aspirations within the controlled parameters of the party line – an archetypal feature of upgraded authoritarianism.

2.2.3 Security Apparatus and Surveillance State

Whilst the façade of reform and technocracy was carefully maintained, the coercive core of the regime remained robust and unaccountable. The Ministry of Interior functioned as the linchpin of Ben Ali's internal security strategy, overseeing an extensive surveillance network that infiltrated virtually all spheres of public and private life (Wolf 2023:92). The *mukhabarat* (secret police) were especially active in the monitoring of political activists, journalists, trade unionists, and students, as well as religious and women's groups that strayed from state-sanctioned discourse (Ibid). Upgraded authoritarianism, as deployed in Tunisia, was not about replacing repression with reform, but about making repression more strategic, less visible, and more embedded in everyday governance. Arbitrary arrests, travel bans, and workplace harassment were often carried out under legalistic pretences, reinforcing a sense of juridical legitimacy (Jebnoun 2013:112). Two key decrees codified this shift. Decree No. 2006-1160 assigned the National Police the mandate of "ensuring state security", "controlling borders", and "enforcing judicial and administrative

decisions", whilst Decree No. 2006-1162 granted the National Guard authority over "protecting land and maritime borders" and "ensuring public security" (Official Gazette of the Republic of Tunisia 2006). Moreover, by criminalising dissent through the language of extremism, terrorism, and national security, the regime was able to recast opposition as deviant and dangerous. This discursive move also facilitated Tunisia's positioning as a regional partner in the post-9/11 security order, thereby shielding the regime from meaningful external criticism (Erdle 2010:471).

2.2.4 Kinship Networks, Economic Privilege, and Authoritarian Liberalism

Economic policy under Ben Ali was presented to the world as a model of liberalisation and structural reform. Tunisia's cooperation with the World Bank, IMF, and EU reflected its alignment with global governance norms around privatisation, deregulation, and investment. Yet this neoliberal turn was systematically instrumentalised by the regime to deepen authoritarian control. Far from dismantling clientelism, liberalisation facilitated its reinvention, as state contracts, import licences, and privatisation deals were channelled through tightly controlled elite networks (Erdle 2010:150).

At the centre of these networks were the President's own relatives, most notably his wife Leila Trabelsi and the extended Trabelsi clan (Ibid). These actors accumulated vast economic wealth through preferential access to land, monopolies, and statebacked credit, often in direct violation of formal regulatory frameworks. This fusion of kinship and capitalism – "the Trabelsi economy" (Wolf 2023:131) – illustrated how authoritarian upgrading enabled the regime to embrace market logics without relinquishing political control. The resulting structure was neither a command economy nor a free market, but a hybrid model in which economic liberalism was subordinated to regime interests (Ibid).

Whilst this system produced deep inequalities and popular resentment, it also embedded the regime in a web of everyday dependencies. Many Tunisians relied on informal patronage networks for access to housing, employment, and basic services, which in turn discouraged open resistance (Ibid). This combination of market-led reform and entrenched privilege exemplified the political economy of authoritarian

upgrading – where governance adapts not by retreating from control, but by reconfiguring the modes through which control is exercised (Heydemann 2007:5).

2.2.5 The Management of Civil Society and Associational Pluralism

Another hallmark of Ben Ali's regime was its approach to civil society. Rather than banning independent organisations outright, the regime developed a model of managed pluralism in which formally autonomous associations were permitted to exist – creating the illusion of a liberal "new era" (Bellin 1995:125) – but then placed under heavy administrative and political constraints (Ibid:133). The 1992 Law on Associations, for instance, introduced extensive licensing requirements, financial disclosure rules, and limitations on foreign funding – all of which allowed the state to control which organisations could operate and how (Wolf 2023:102). In line with authoritarian upgrading, Ben Ali "blended repression, regulation, co-optation, and the appropriation of NGO functions by the state to contain the deepening of civil societies and to erode their capacity to challenge political authority" (Heydemann 2007:6).

Many associations, particularly those focused on development, culture, or social welfare, were tolerated so long as they remained apolitical (Bellin 1995:140). Others, such as professional syndicates and women's groups, were co-opted through leadership appointments, funding incentives, and ideological alignment with the regime (Ibid). This strategy was not simply about neutralising opposition, but about *curating* a civil society that could reflect the pluralist image the regime sought to project. In this way, the state was able to perform democratic inclusion without ceding political space.

At the same time, as Chapter 4 discusses, certain organisations – such as Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) – persisted in maintaining a degree of critical autonomy. These groups often faced harassment, surveillance, and reputational attacks, yet their continued existence enabled the regime to point to a nominally active civil society. This balancing act between repression and accommodation typifies upgraded authoritarianism's capacity to co-opt rather than eliminate spaces of dissent (Heydemann 2007:2).

2.2.6 International Legitimacy and Reformist Branding

A final and essential element of Ben Ali's upgraded authoritarian model was the cultivation of international legitimacy through selective reform (Cavatorta & Haugbølle 2012:182). Tunisia's association agreement with the EU (signed in 1995), its participation in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), and its cooperation with UN agencies were central to this strategy. These frameworks not only provided economic and technical assistance, but also conferred normative legitimacy upon the regime's discourse of stability, development, and modernisation.

Indeed, the regime's rhetorical commitment to human rights and democracy earned international praise for its "slow but steady process of genuine democratisation" (Ibid:188), even as repression and elite privilege intensified. Through this positioning, legal reforms in the areas of women's rights, education, and public administration were frequently highlighted in international reports and diplomatic exchanges, reinforcing Tunisia's image as a regional exception. Whilst many of these reforms were substantively limited or inconsistently applied, they were effective in sustaining Tunisia's international reputation as a "moderate" Arab state (Wolf 2023:102), alongside feeding directly into the regime's legitimacy at home and bolstering the narrative that Tunisia was on a unique path of controlled, modernising reform.

The Ben Ali regime's durability was thus evidently not the result of coercion alone, nor of simple inertia, but of a complex strategy of adaptation that combined executive centralisation, selective liberalisation, and strategic co-optation across multiple spheres of state and society. The concept of upgraded authoritarianism offers a compelling lens through which to interpret these developments, allowing us to move beyond static typologies of "hard" versus "soft" authoritarianism and to appreciate the dynamic ways in which regimes modernise repression under the guise of reform.

Having provided a roadmap of the core institutions and logics that sustained Ben Ali's authoritarian upgrading, the next section of this chapter turns to *state feminism* – the one dimension of this system particularly salient for this thesis' purposes.

2.3 Definitionally Situating 'State Feminism'

The concept of state feminism emerged largely in Western academic discourse, where it is understood as a progressive, institutionalised route to gender equality through state structures. Early Western conceptions of state feminism, notably articulated by Helga Hernes (1987) and Dorothy Stetson and Amy Mazur (1995), view it as the strategic incorporation of feminist goals and activists within governmental institutions. Hernes (1987) introduced the idea of the 'woman-friendly' state, depicting governmental efforts to promote gender equality and address women's specific needs through legal frameworks and policy implementation. Stetson and Mazur extended this by emphasising the role of state agencies – referred to as women's policy agencies (WPAs) – which they view as key players within Western democracies, translating feminist advocacy into policy and creating measurable progress towards gender equality (Stetson & Mazur 1995).

Later Western-focused scholarship often evaluated state feminism through the prism of democratic governance, implicitly associating the institutionalisation of feminist policies with progressive democratic practices (Kantola & Squires, 2012). To give an example, Johanna Kantola and Judith Squires define state feminism as "any statebased agency… sub-national, national, regional, or international…that seeks to promote gender equality (often described in this context as the 'advancement of women')" (Kantola & Squires 2012:384). This positive framing assumes a stable democratic context, where state feminism can operate relatively autonomously from authoritarian control and actively engage civil society stakeholders in open policy dialogues. Additional scholars within Western feminist literature have examined state feminism critically but constructively, focusing on effectiveness, policy outcomes, and degrees of institutionalisation (see for example Mazur & McBride, 2007; Outshoorn & Kantola, 2007). Such evaluations consider state feminism within liberal democracies as ideally representative of grassroots feminist demands, aligned with broader democratic principles of representation, accountability, and transparency.

Valuable as it is for liberal democracies, this literature travels poorly to non-Western, authoritarian, and postcolonial settings. It presumes pluralism, transparency, and

open civil-society engagement – conditions absent in Benalist Tunisia. As a result, it cannot capture cases where “state feminism” was deployed chiefly to consolidate authoritarian power, rather than to secure women’s rights. Nor does it foreground knowledge/power dynamics: in many contexts, state feminism is bound up with state-building, producing authorised gender knowledge, whilst marginalising rivals. Thus, Western frameworks have limited explanatory power for understanding how feminist discourse and policy are strategically manipulated to bolster regime authority and international legitimacy, as in Tunisia.

In Middle East contexts, state feminism has been varyingly theorised by limited studies as “the exploitation of gender issues for the benefit of the central power in order to strengthen itself during times of crisis” (Ianni and Giampaolo 2022:6), as well as “a top-down process that…favoured the emergence of a single body…which represented and carried forward women’s demands within the perimeter traced by the ruling elites and in a manner functional to their plan to modernise the country” (Ibid). In the Tunisian context, state feminism also “differed from other state-building projects in the Middle East in its combination of liberal pretensions, nominative socialism, and authoritarian control” (Kallander 2021:13). Indeed, state feminism was considered by Tunisia’s leaders to be an elemental tenet of ‘true’ Tunisian identity, or “Tunisianité” (Debuysere 2016), by virtue of its creation, and public imposition, of the ultimate ‘la Femme Tunisienne’ (Ibid:203). This truth regime of Tunisian femininity was not merely symbolic – it served as a governance tool to marginalise political opposition, particularly Islamist and independent feminist voices.

The historian Amy Kallander has traced these impulses of Tunisian state feminism to the country’s 1950s national liberation struggle, led by president Bourguiba, which saw state feminism emerge as a “liberal ethos” (Kallander 2021:41). This involved state feminism centring “on Bourguiba as an individual responsible for women’s emancipation” (Ibid), becoming part of the broader production of security in Tunisia as it reinforced women’s traditional roles “as wives, mothers, and guardians of Islamic tradition” (Ben Youssef 2005:95), to guarantee social order and Tunisianité (read: moderation, tolerance, ‘feminism’ (Debuysere 2016:204)). However, whilst the colonial state had employed traditions to oppress women, the idea was that the state

feminism pursued by the independent state, involving state-directed legislation and policies related to women's rights, the personal security of women, and women's role in guarding broader societal security, would now liberate them (Kallander 2024:41). In this way, Bourguiba "crafted a legacy of personal commitment to women's rights" (Ibid), which would also characterise Ben Ali's state feminism.

Accordingly, I briefly trace Bourguiba's women's agenda – its historical roots and the incorporation of "women's security" into state governance – to clarify the terrain that later enabled Ben Ali to upgrade authoritarianism via a state-feminist project.

2.4 The Birth of State Feminism in Bourguibist Tunisia

As recognised by the Tunisian sociologist Mounira Charrad, since the nationalist struggle against French colonial rule in the early 1950s, Tunisia's policy towards women has been determined by "the political struggles for state power dominating the national scene at any given historical moment" (Charrad 1997:285), including over topics such as colonialism, nationalism, modernity, and Islamic cultural authenticity (Ibid). In Tunisia, women-focused policy has historically centred upon laws promulgated by state feminism, either expanding or restricting women's rights in family law, with "issues of family law dominating the political discourse on gender" (Ibid:287). Charrad valuably foregrounds the nub of the country's contest over gender, which has essentially amounted to whether Shari'a-based rules prevail, or legal reforms reallocate power between men and women (Ibid). Read more broadly, this is a struggle between a modernist, state-led project featuring the creation of "a hegemonic truth regime celebrating the specificity of moderate and 'feminist' Tunisian identity" (Debuysere 2016:226), and alternative visions of womanhood advanced by anti-establishment actors, including Islamists.

Following independence in 1956, a fierce contest for rule of the budding sovereign state broke out, with the modernizing and traditional camps each striving to destroy the other (Charrad 1997:293). Eventually, Bourguiba's urban-union-backed camp prevailed and swiftly neutralised the traditional base by curbing the religious establishment – abolishing religious landholdings and weakening religious education

–, whilst crafting a state-managed Islam (Salem 2004; Webb 2013). He also placed "reforms relating to women and family law at the top of his agenda" (Della Valle 2022:125), setting his top-down state 'feminist' project in motion. In 1956, Bourguiba's Neo-Dustur party dismantled existing women's organisations to create UNFT, "which would serve his party's plans" (Ibid). Termed the 'instrumentalization of the women question' by Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh (2014:21), the state allocated for UNFT resources, subsidies, and visibility not on offer to other women's organisations, assisting it in its mandate to "serve as a showcase for the proactive policy of the state" (Ibid). These policies included furthering Bourguiba's "dismantlement of the Tunisian Islamic elite and its institutions by a secularising state" (Boulby 1988:591), instrumental to which was the 'woman question' and the interests of the budding modernist state project (Debuysere 2016:208).

Also in 1956, the body of legislation known as the *'Code du statut personnel'*, or Code of Personal Status (CSP), was published, which introduced marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance law reforms (Charrad 1997:295). On the status of women, the CSP scrapped some of the most patriarchal Shari'a provisions, including abolishing polygamy, removing the right of husbands to cast off wives, permitting women to file for divorce, and granting women increased custody rights (Ibid). Further, whilst in the pre-independence period Bourguiba was amongst those leaders calling upon women to remain veiled, as president, Bourguiba now "called the veil an odious rag and a dreadful burden" (Ibid). Beyond ostensibly disconnecting the state from the religious sphere, the CSP also "established the state as the sovereign power over the juridical and social spheres" (Yacoubi 2016:257). These upshots of the CSP were all part of Bourguiba's "war against underdevelopment" (Charrad 1997:296), which at its core was an attempt by the executive to extinguish any perceived obstacles to the establishment of a modern state (Ibid). These reforms were presented to the Tunisian public "as a new phase in Islamic innovation" (Ibid:296), and meant that, by the mid-1950s, the Tunisian state was autonomous of the kin-based communities and the Islamic establishment, both of whom had been successfully marginalized (Ibid).

Certain theorists have termed the Bourguibist state's reforms of the 1950s and 1960s "feminist" (Ibid:295). However, upon closer examination, Bourguiba's relinquishing of many of the conservative institutions and customs of traditional Islam, as well as his quashing of the Tunisian Islamic opposition, was part of his "modernising revolution" (Boulby 1988:590), implemented to achieve the Neo-Dustur party's desired remodelling of the Tunisian state (Ibid:592). Bourguiba undoubtedly strove to guide Tunisia along a path of modernist reform featuring a thoroughgoing restructuring of Islam in the combatting of underdevelopment, central to which was the construction of Tunisian modernist identity and an explicit *state 'f*eminist' project (Debuysere 2016), for the purposes of sustaining his control of the country (Charrad 1997). Tunisia's women's security policy at the time was instead the outcome of struggles over state power and authentic 'Tunisianité', a structural legacy which Ben Ali would inherit in 1989.

2.5 'Upgrading' Authoritarianism under Ben Ali: State Feminism as an Authoritarian Strategy

Like Bourguiba, Ben Ali's rule remained aligned with Tunisia's post-independence political history, which has been characterised by top-down led state building projects, reinforced by political interest and politically expedient policymaking. However, even after consolidating control, ostensibly progressive measures toward women persisted, as they helped "fortify Carthage" (Wolf 2023:84). This is because, Ben Ali's utmost concern was to 'upgrade' his authoritarianism, with women's security one of the "political resources that bolster regimes' hold on power" (Heydemann 2007:5). Consequently, when Ben Ali seized power in 1987, rather than dismantling Bourguiba's state feminism, Ben Ali securitised and repurposed it for regime survival. Whilst Bourguiba's state feminism was primarily modernist and developmentalist, Ben Ali used women's rights discourse to justify political repression, particularly against Islamists, as the proceeding sections will reveal. Women were reframed as defenders of secularism, and policies promoting their security were cast as a bulwark against 'backwardness' and fundamentalism. Nuancing Charrad's argument to specificize the tactics undertaken by the powermotivated Benalist state in the area of women's security, this chapter will

further reveal how these tactics involved the perpetuation and elaboration of Bourguiba's modernist truth regime and the progressive imaginary of 'la Femme', as principal pillars of Ben Ali's top-down state feminism (Debuysere 2016:204). Chapter 5 then reveals how he was largely assisted in this endeavour by the 'like-minded' UNFT. This creates for my chapter an original argument linking sociological studies on the role of state feminism in Ben Ali's nation-building efforts, to insights from the political science literature focused upon the authoritarian exploitations of Ben Ali's state, viewing the purpose of both as having been pursued to stifle the contestatory capacities of outside groups and sustain absolute power. As will be demonstrated in this proceeding section, the making of women's security policy would become inextricable from "political struggles involving issues of…control of state power" (Charrad 1997:310), as well as Ben Ali's desire to sustain authoritarian governance and one-man rule, finding the regime peculiarly pursuing certain strategies towards women in order to crush its main opposition and 'provocative' ideas.

2.5.1 Islamic Fundamentalism and the 1990s: The Context Configuring the Benalist State's Early Exploitation of Strategy Towards Women

At the time of Bourguiba's removal from office in 1987, "the voices defending Islam had grown louder and Islamic fundamentalism had changed from a cultural phenomenon into a political threat" (Charrad 1997:300). Indeed, various Islamist organisations were vying for control of the state during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The most prominent amongst these organisations was *'Al Jamaa al Islamiyya'*, or the Islamic Group, which was established in 1972 by Rachid Ghannouchi. After applying to register as an official political party in 1981, *Al Jamaa al Islamiyya* renamed itself 'Movement of Islamic Tendency' (MTI), followed by 'Ennahda' in 1989, and harboured the support of around ninety percent of Tunisian Islamists (Allani 2009).

As contended by Allani (2009), the Ben Ali government's relationship with Ennahda oscillated "between confrontation and participation" (Ibid:257), representative of the enduringly turbulent nature of national Tunisian politics. Between 1987 and 1989, the Ben Ali government attempted to co-opt Ennahda, pursuing a carrot-and-stick

strategy in an effort to lend legitimacy to its new rule and consolidate power. During this period, Ben Ali attempted to temper Bourguiba's secularism, leading some to "conclude that a competition had developed between the RCD and the MTI over who was more Islamist" (Brand 1998:43). Indeed, Ben Ali's first speech to the Tunisian parliament after Bourguiba was declared unfit to govern in 1987 began with '*In the name of God, the Clement, the Merciful*' (Al Bab 2011), an opening historically refrained from by Bourguiba, which was designed to persuade the Islamists of Ben Ali's commitment to "establishing the Arab-Muslim identity of Tunisia" (McCarthy 2014:19). In 1988, Ben Ali also invited Ennahda to participate in the high council of the National Pact, considered "an effort to exert his control over the new political pluralism he had promised after the coup" (Ibid:17). This was part of the president's instrumentalising of religion, "making concessions that appeared striking but which were in fact superficial, in order to undercut his opponents" (Ibid:19). In the same vein, in 1989, Ben Ali offered Ennahda representation in the Islamic high council, as well as permitted it to take part in the 1989 parliamentary elections (Allani 2009:263). During this election period, Ennahda emerged as "by far the largest opposition force" (McCarthy 2014:19), demonstrating that Ben Ali's strategy of attempting to weaken the political appeal of Ennahda by proving his own Islamist credentials had backfired. This was alarming for a president committed to a monopoly of power, who feared that the Ennahda example would serve as a "precedent that would usurp [his] prerogative in the area of control of religious establishments" (Allani 2009:261).

As argued by Asad (2003), secularism is one of the tools through which the modern secular state endeavours to direct individual life, requiring "clearly demarcated spaces that it can classify and regulate" (Asad 2003:200). In line with this insight, mere months following the elections, "Ben Ali began to paint the Islamists as a critical threat to Islam itself…it was only the state that could defend against this threat" (McCarthy 2014:19). During the election period, a huge portrait of Ben Ali was also installed at the entrance to the old holy city of North African Islam, Kairouan, with a banner declaring him "Protector of the Sanctuary and of Religion" (Middle East Research and Information Project, 163, 1990). Further, an Amnesty International report published in 1994 on 'speech versus reality' in Tunisia wrote concerning the "violations of 1990 and 1991", during which the Ben Ali government

invoked Article 3 of the Law on Political Parties, which prohibits parties from basing their activities on religion, race, sex, or language, in order to prevent Ennahda from registering itself as an official political party (Amnesty International 1994). Independent investigation by Amnesty International at the time also determined that at least 8,000 Ennahda sympathisers were arrested by the police between 1990 and 1992 (Ibid). Partially in response to the censure from Amnesty International, the government attempted to defend its record on the international stage, forming an investigative commission in 1991 to examine allegations of torture of Ennahda detainees. However, the commission's final report, released in 1992, avoided the use of the word 'torture', reporting instead that "over an unspecified period…police officers had been implicated in…bad treatment…and featured a generally upbeat tone and failure to provide details about the cases" (Human Rights Watch 1993). Domestically, many "non-Islamists justified the assault as the only means of preventing religious elements from taking power" (Brand 1998:44), and Ben Ali attempted to cajole the public that "there is no other defender of the religion of the Tunisians than the State" (Ben Ali 1989, in McCarthy 2014:20). This was a sentiment announced in Ben Ali's *'Programme pour une Étape Nouvelle'* speech, given in November 1989 to mark the second anniversary of his coup, during which he similarly stated, "that is why we say to those who mix religion and politics that there is no place for a religious party"
(Ibid:64). Evidently, once Ennahda emerged as a serious political contender, the Ben Ali government placed its strategy concerning the Islamists on a course of 'confrontation', one which would soon evolve into violent clampdown, torture, and imprisonment by the repressive forces of Ben Ali's regime. This confrontational strategy was undoubtedly motivated by Ben Ali's desire to "regulate religious affairs so as to assert the state's control over religious symbols in order to monopolise political activity" (McCarthy 2014:8), fulfilling his power consolidation agenda.

Women groups and feminist associations similarly interpreted the growing popularity of Islamists as a threat, albeit to the embryonic gains which had been offered to them by the Bourguibist state and the CSP, as opposed to control of the state itself. In 1989, female employment had deteriorated by 20.3 percent, and women were

terrified by the potential appeal of the 'Algerian model', wherein Islamists had achieved political success and numerous women were killed by jihadists during the 'Algiers Spring' of 1988 (Ben Hassine 2020). In Tunisia, during the 1989 parliamentary elections, Ennahda "put forward some extremist proposals denouncing women's rights and exploiting religion in political life" (Allani 2009:265). Helping grant us insight into the political climate during this period, the April 1989 issue of the Tunisian magazine '*Al Hayat Al Thakafeya'* (Cultural Life) reveals that Ennahda members at the time were circulating Muhammad al-Senussi's message on women, an Islamic theologian and academic who had theorised upon the condition of women from an Islamic philosophical context during the 1890s. Al-Senussi's writings described women as the weaker sex, claiming that this necessitated their domesticity and their protection by men – both professed by him to be indisputable teachings from the Qur'anic *Hadiths* and the instruction of the Prophet (Al Hayat Al Thakafeya 1989:7). In May 1989, the independent political journal *Le Maghreb* reported that the commander of the Tunis division of Ennahda had also gone so far as to propose a return to slavery for women, if considered fitting by the Grand Imam, a bid he later retracted following severe condemnation (Le Maghreb 1989b). Evidently, Ennahda remained "loyal to its Salafist positions" (Allani 2009:270),[4] as well as hostile to women's emancipation. Unsurprisingly, faced with the threat of fundamentalists

gaining power, "the regime…and feminists formed a partial alliance against a common overriding enemy" (Charrad 2014:300).

In response, Ennahda attempted to mobilise public opinion against the government. It is important to note here that this mobilisation was set against a backdrop of not insignificant electoral success for the Islamists in the 1989 elections, approximated at 15 percent of the national vote and up to 30 percent in a scattering of urban areas (Meddeb 2019). As a result, Ben Ali and his government had now come to view

[4] Salafism is a revival movement within Sunni Islam, which calls for Muslims to follow original practices of the early Muslims, known as the 'Salaf'. It is typically viewed as a "particularly uncompromising" form of Islam, tied to the worldview of Arabia in the 7th century (Georgetown University 2022; Brookings Institution 2016).

Ennahda as their primary opponent (Ibid), and the secularisation of the country in the face of increasing Islamist sympathies, for the purposes of guaranteeing regime security, as their primary objective. For the government, “the women’s issue also…became instrumental to the construction of a democratic and secular Tunisia” (Della Valle 2022:125), as they observed feminist groups, such as the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), protest against Islamist attempts to challenge the CSP (Antonakis-Nashif 2015). The state began soliciting women’s movements such as UNFT, working at the time to promote Tunisia’s African, as opposed to Arab/Islamic, identity (Ben Hassine 2020). Ben Ali also recognised ATFD in 1989, and “appealed to all outstanding women in human rights organisations; to the ATFD; and to professionals, intellectuals, and others to participate in an advisory commission created in June 1991” (Ibid:17). This would mark the inception of the Benalist state’s pursuit of a strategy of state feminism, “embarking on a ‘war’ against Islamists through the new party’s emancipatory women’s policy” (Ibid:20). The Tunisian state would now once again “become the chaperone of women’s rights” (Yacoubi 2016:257), in exchange requiring “women’s unconditional support and enlistment in the anti-Islamist struggle” (Ibid:258). This was in stark contrast to the period prior to the 1989 elections, which had featured “the state’s initial silence in the face of the questioning of women’s gains” (Brand 1998:41).

2.5.2 Instituting State Feminism in Ben Ali’s Tunisia

From the beginning of his presidency, the support of UNFT women was central to Ben Ali’s ability to retain his absolute rule, in spite of an Islamist power takeover attempt, as well as institute state feminism in Tunisia. In the aftermath of the uncovering of a coup plot in 1991 against Ben Ali, the UNFT women’s organisation, which as indicated above had been state-sponsored since being born out of Bourguiba’s Neo-Dustur party in 1956, issued an appeal to Tunisians to rally around the government. The 1991 edition of UNFT’s magazine, ‘*Femme’,* implored “foremost…Tunisian women, to show vigilance especially at this time…and to mobilize themselves even more around our President” (Riza 1991:4, in Charrad & Goeken 2006:36). In February 1991, Ben Ali created the Centre for Research, Documentation, and Information on Women (CREDIF), to be headed by the

renowned activist Soukaina Bouraoui, in order to advance women's rights (Ben Hassine 2020). In 1992, UNFT's executive committee also released the following proclamation, demonstrating the threat felt by women activists at the time from fundamentalists, similar to that experienced by the government:

> "We know that the gains made by women are defended by the highest authorities of the country and, at present, there is no reason to fear that things will change. However, the CPS would certainly be in danger if power fell in the hands of the Islamic fundamentalists…and then nobody will be able to do anything about it" (Chater 1992:276-277, in Charrad 2017:303).

Sensing the political expediency of maintaining its assigning of increased importance to women, "the official discourse of the party continued to centralize the role of women in society and in the fight against all forms of extremism" (Ben Hassine 2020:22). One of the most compelling aspects of the Ben Ali regime in its early days is the extent to which its strategy in dealing with Ennahda became more and more inextricable from its strategy towards women. In truth, we see during the 1990s how "the state gradually come to view women as a natural first defence line against the Islamists" (Brand 1998:41). In point of fact, once Ben Ali "triumphed over Ennahda he restored modernist state discourse and its conception of women's rights" (Yacoubi 2016:262), instituting a policy of state feminism "to gain political legitimacy" (Ben Hassine 2020:1). Ben Ali's embrace of state feminism represented a core dimension of his authoritarian upgrading strategy, leveraging women's rights to fortify his regime's legitimacy. By presenting progressive gender policies as evidence of Tunisia's modernisation and aligning himself against Islamist threats, Ben Ali effectively positioned his regime as indispensable to Tunisia's stability and modernity. This simultaneously involved constraining the space available for genuine feminist activism. Indeed, after his *mukhabarat* had imprisoned approximately 8,000 members of Ennahda by 1992, Ben Ali created the Secretariat of State for Women and Family, which became the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Family and Children, and the Elderly (MAFFEPA), in the same year (CMI Report R 2016:5). MAFFEPA's official mandate was tellingly to "coordinate and develop government policy for

women's promotion" (Ibid), and two women ministers were inaugurated in 1992 (Ben Hassine 2020). This was part of the process of creating a top-down state feminist project which espoused a modernist image of 'la Femme', depicted as "professional, educated, modern, emancipated, and secular" (Debuysere 2016:206). Expanding upon Debuysere's insights, this carefully crafted image of 'la Femme Tunisienne' was not merely symbolic; it functioned as an integral part of Ben Ali's strategy for positioning the state as the guardian and architect of modernity and secularism in contrast to Islamist rivals, thus legitimating the regime's authoritarian practices through a veneer of progressive policies.

As ATFD and UNFT began demanding "equality of inheritance and punishment for physical violence against women…for the CPS to end the inferior status of women in the family and to lift barriers to intermarriage" (Ibid:30), Ben Ali also established a committee to review the CSP in February 1992, comprised of judges, lawyers, and professors (Ibid). Following this, in August 1992, the government issued legislation expanding the CSP, known as the 'Mesures d'Aout' (CID 1994), both in response to demands from women-focused and feminist organisations, and in order to strengthen its connection with (and control of) them for regime survival purposes. These legislative expansions illustrate how Ben Ali co-opted feminist language and selectively adopted reforms promoting women's security as political tools for consolidating regime power, a hallmark of authoritarian upgrading. By creating the illusion of responsiveness to feminist demands, Ben Ali was able to maintain tight control over the gender discourse, marginalising voices within feminist movements who sought genuine and substantive reforms. As argued by the Tunisian activist Boutheina Ben Hassine, Ben Ali's "quest for legitimacy over his predecessor also led him to undertake a major reform of the Code of Personal Status (CPS)" (Ben Hassine 2020:1). Indeed, from this point forwards, the Benalist state's state feminism would also progress in great measure through legislative changes, as evidenced by the USAID-funded Consortium for International Development's (CID) 1994 research report on *'The Role and Status of Women in Tunisian Society'*, stating that "Tunisia is at the forefront of African and Middle Eastern nations with respect

to legislation favourable to women's rights" (CID 1994:23). The CID report further uncovered that the government's legislative strategy at the time was accompanied by its employment of organisations such as UNFT as "institutional liaisons" (Ibid) to translate the content of these reforms to the populace, in accordance with the government's official line (Ibid), which Chapter 3 will extensively consider. This was made possible by virtue of UNFT's exhaustive grassroots membership, featuring 27 regional delegations and 650 local sections up to 2010 (CMI Report R 2016:5).

The 'Mesures d'Aout' enshrined in law an extension of the notion of women's rights beyond the family, and altered the objective of women from achieving gender equality to reaching full partnership with men (Washington Report 2007). As confirmed by a 1999 publication by MAFFEPA, 'the Change' of August 1992 consisted of "the adoption of a gender-based planning methodology and the enactment of important *legal and institutional reforms* aimed at giving firm rooting to the principles of equity, equality of opportunity, and partnership between men and women in both private and public life" (MAFFEPA 1999, emphasis mine). A further surveying of MAFFEPA's reporting reveals the legislative emphasis of the Tunisian state's state feminism, especially during the regime's formative years, stating that "Tunisia played a ground-breaking role very early on, in enacting truly avant-garde legislation to reinforce and confirm women's rights…this orientation has become still more pronounced since the beginning of the new era" (MAFFEPA 1999). This 'novel' legislation featured new laws "around mothers' child custody rights in the event of divorce, the right of a mother to consent to the marriage of her minor daughter, and the improvement of divorce proceedings…the Nationality Code was revised to allow a mother to transmit her nationality to her child…and the state applied the Copenhagen agreement that women must earn the same salary as men" (Ben Hassine 2020:30). This effort to advance women's security through the legal sphere was an attempt to undercut the independent influence of the women's movements, responding to their requests through minimalistic legalistic tools which gave prominence to the endeavours of 'the Architect of Change' – Ben Ali

(Debuysere 2016, 2017). Indeed, “the president kept women’s affairs as his personal portfolio…interest aggregation from the bottom up was not appreciated” (Brand 1998:44). As Tunisian feminist Khadija Arfaoui revealingly argues, organisations such as UNFT became a mirror of the Benalist regime and its state feminism (SAIS 2012), as well as “used to show the Western world that Tunisia was a progressive state” (Cotton 2006:12), a phenomenon which will be more deeply examined as the subject of Chapter 3. Enabling Ben Ali to concentrate more power in his person, state bureaucracy, and ruling party, this legislative strategy became part and parcel of the ‘System Ben Ali’s’ concern with quieting the opposition and preserving its authoritarian governance whilst being surrounded by global democratising states.

In line with the Benalist state’s legislative pursuit of state feminism, MAFFEPA emphasised how “Tunisia is also considered to have pioneered in ratifying international conventions concerning women’s rights” (MAFFEPA 1999), such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1985 (CERD/C/TUN/19 2007). In September 1995, following the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women, Tunisia ratified the Conference’s Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which represented a global agenda to “take all necessary measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and the girl child and remove all obstacles to gender equality and the advancement and empowerment of women” (UN 1995). MAFFEPA’s efforts following the Conference emphasised especially the Beijing Declaration’s eighth plan, which unsurprisingly focused upon institutional mechanisms and laws, policies, and programmes advancing gender equality (UN Women 1995). For example, MAFFEPA revealed that “in connection with the preparation of the 8th plan, it chose to carry out gendermodulated planning as part of an approach tending to provide specific mechanisms and programs for women, that would at the same time integrate them into the general dynamic of development, in line with the recommendations of the Fourth
World Conference on Women” (MAFFEPA 1999). Further, a national commission on ‘women and development’ was also set up by CREDIF in order to prepare for the

eighth and ninth development plans (1991-1996 and 1997-2001) (Ibid), with the ninth plan focused upon the human rights of women and the creation of "national laws, policies, and plans to ensure women's rights and protect them against violations" (UN Women 1995). In adopting the methodology advocated at the Beijing Conference into its legislative strategy concerning women's security, the Ben Ali regime was "able to use its concern for women…as proof, especially to the outside world, of its continuing commitment to modernity and human rights" (Brand 1998:44). Beyond Beijing, the 18th and 19th periodic reports of Tunisia submitted to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Radical Discrimination in 2007 reveals that, in 2003, Tunisia also ratified the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (CERD/C/TUN/19 2007).

MAFFEPA has argued that the government's legislative strategy, involving a "very full range of laws and mechanisms, has helped strengthen the presence of women in the field of political action" (MAFFEPA 1999). Certainly, the number of women installed in positions of political power during this period was unprecedented. In January 1992, Ben Ali appointed a woman as vice president of the parliament, and named the RCD member Chadlia Boukhchina as his political advisor, the first woman to ever serve in this role (Brand 1998:45). In the months which ensued, RCD party loyalist Naziha Zarrouk was chosen as the permanent secretary responsible for RCD women's affairs, and later gained a position on the RCD Politburo; and six women were also installed as foreign affairs, international cooperation, national economy, housing, transportation, and professional training and employment ministry attachés (Ibid). Further, data released by MAFFEPA indicates that during the parliamentary elections of 1994, the proportion of female deputies rose from 4.16% to 7%, with the municipal elections of 1995 seeing women obtain 17% of seats, compared to 14% previously (MAFFEPA 1999). This strategy continued throughout the 2000s, with Ben Ali's cabinet reshuffle of 10 November 2004 seeing women account for 14.89% of total government membership, compared with 13.6% previously; women representation in the Chamber of Deputies double between 1999 and 2004 from 11.5% to 22.75%; and women constitute 17% of the members of the

Chamber of Councillors, with a woman vice president (CERD/C/TUN/19 2007). Concerning the make-up of Ben Ali's consultative committees, by 2004, women formed 20% of the members of the Economic and Social Council (compared to 11% in 2002), 20% of the members of the Higher Council for Communication, and 13.3% of the members of the Higher Council of the Judiciary, with 20 women also employed as special advisors in ministerial cabinets (Ibid). Evidently, Ben Ali was 'rewarding' women for rallying behind the state "with a series of gestures of support, both symbolic and concrete" (Brand 1998:47). Yet, critically, this legislative agenda and enhanced female political representation under Ben Ali did not equate to genuine empowerment. Rather, it was largely symbolic, reinforcing state feminism's image of 'La Femme Tunisienne' as highly educated, urban, middle class, and secular, marginalising other identities that did not align with this idealised image (Debuysere 2016). Such selectiveness allowed Ben Ali to perpetuate domestic authoritarianism through controlled civil society activism and restricted political space for meaningful opposition from women. However, as Chapters 3 and 4 next show, this control was neither absolute nor uncontested: even the regime-aligned UNFT occasionally exercised visible autonomy, whilst independent feminist organisations like ATFD and AFTURD leveraged their expertise and networks to subtly influence policy and contest dominant narratives from within the authoritarian framework.

Further, the fact that this 'reward' of political participation was initiated around the same time as the regime's forces were harassing 'non-conforming' women's groups, is significant. As determined by Ben Hassine, "the regime remained repressive as it threatened the women's section of the Tunisian League of Human Rights and imprisoned Islamist women" (Ben Hassine 2020:23), who represented "devalued forms of femininity" (Debuysere 2016:206) threatening the 'hegemonic femininity' of the state's ideal type of the modern, secular *La Femme* (Ibid). Even ATFD was periodically denied the right to hold press conferences, and forced to narrow its realm of activity, due to its insistence on maintaining its independence from the state and pursuing political issues (Brand 1998). Manifestly, the 'rewarding' of women would only be advanced within "the framework of reinforcing domestic stability, Tunisia's image of progress and pluralism, and women's dependence upon the state"

(Brand 1998:47). To this end, the increased political participation of women complemented the state's legalistically-driven "policy of institutionalizing a concern for women and their security" (Ibid) outlined above, and was characterized by the "obviously selective promotion of women to high profile positions" (Ibid). Ironically, the state's legislative strategy – apparently intended to promote women's security – would render women in Tunisia less secure, leaving them "dependent upon the state to defend their rights" (Ibid), as Ben Ali continued to personally monopolise decisions related to women and impose an artificial modernist, elitist, image of Tunisian womanhood, in order to secure his own power.

2.6 The Fall of Ben Ali: Authoritarian Upgrading in Collapse

The collapse of Ben Ali's regime in January 2011 is often portrayed as the sudden toppling of a repressive autocracy by popular mobilisation. Whilst this is partially true, a closer examination reveals that the very structures of authoritarian upgrading that sustained the regime also sowed the seeds of its downfall. Ben Ali's personalised rule, his privileging of executive power over party coherence, and his hollowing out of civil society left the state brittle and unresponsive in the face of growing unrest.

As protests erupted following street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in December 2010, they were not only driven by economic despair and police violence, but also exacerbated by deep fractures within the ruling RCD party itself (Wolf 2023:174). Years of marginalising party cadres outside Ben Ali's inner circle, especially in neglected regions like Sidi Bouzid, meant that even local RCD members joined or facilitated the uprising (Ibid). The regime's failure to mobilise counter-protests, along with its overreliance on security repression, revealed how authoritarian upgrading had corroded the very institutional mechanisms it depended on.

Notably, interviews conducted by Ann Wolf in 2016 with former RCD cadres uncovered that Ben Ali's reluctance to engage his own party – long relegated to a symbolic role – further isolated him in the regime's final days (Wolf 2023:186). His late reform promises, silence on elite corruption, and inability to restore order

ultimately prompted both elites and protestors to abandon him (Ibid). The rapid dissolution of the RCD following his flight, and the collapse of state coherence in the days that followed, underscored the fragility of a system built on centralised control, technocratic façade, and selective inclusion.

This analysis reinforces the core argument of this chapter: that authoritarian upgrading, whilst designed to project modernity and responsiveness, produced exclusion, inequality, and institutional hollowness. Even state feminism – deployed as part of the regime's modernising image – could not mask the regime's structural decay. The end of Ben Ali's rule did not signal the sudden eruption of resistance, but rather the implosion of an authoritarian order whose internal contradictions had long been accumulating.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has critically examined the concept of state feminism as it evolved within Tunisia's distinctive political and historical context, beginning by situating the Ben Ali regime within the framework of authoritarian upgrading (Heydemann 2007), given its fusion of technocratic reforms, surveillance expansion, co-optation of civil society, and elite economic privilege – all deployed to consolidate power, contain dissent, and tightly control political participation.

Having provided the essential historical-political context for understanding Benalist governance, the chapter then demonstrated that Tunisian state feminism was not simply a mechanism for advancing gender equality, but rather a strategic tool intimately tied to authoritarian governance, regime consolidation, and national identity formation. By tracing state feminism's historical trajectory from Bourguiba through to Ben Ali, this chapter revealed how the Tunisian state's approach to women's security was consistently instrumentalised as part of broader political strategies aimed at securing regime legitimacy, controlling dissent, and projecting a modernist national image both domestically and internationally.

In particular, this chapter argued that under Ben Ali, state feminism was strategically advanced, becoming deeply embedded within a broader authoritarian governance

strategy aimed at both consolidating political power and marginalising opposition, notably Islamist and later independent feminist groups. The chapter illustrated how Ben Ali strategically leveraged women's rights discourses and institutions, exemplified by entities such as UNFT and MAFFEPA, as political resources akin to other tools of authoritarian control, such as the police and secret services. By presenting progressive policies, legislative reforms, and increased political representation for women as central elements of his regime's identity, Ben Ali effectively secured both domestic and international legitimacy, masking authoritarian excesses through a façade of progressive modernity. This phenomenon will continue to be explored in Chapter 3, which specifically analyses the role of UNFT as a key actor within Ben Ali's state feminist framework, revealing how the organisation served as an instrumental partner in disseminating and legitimising the state's vision of women.

Chapter 2 further illustrated how state feminism under Ben Ali contributed significantly to the production and perpetuation of the concept of 'Tunisianité', and particularly to the state-constructed ideal of 'La Femme Tunisienne', which privileged certain categories of women over others. This hegemonic image served not only as a symbol of Tunisia's supposed modernisation and progressivism, but also as a disciplining mechanism, actively marginalising alternative, non-conforming expressions of femininity. Drawing on insights from scholars such as Loes Debuysere, Laura Brand, and Mounira Charrad, the chapter additionally demonstrated how state feminism under Ben Ali simultaneously enabled specific forms of women's political participation, whilst strategically suppressing genuine feminist activism that challenged state authority.

Consequently, this chapter situated Benalist state feminism firmly within the broader framework of authoritarian upgrading (Heydemann 2007), with the Tunisian case nuancing its depiction in the Western-focused literature as inherently progressive. It contended that state feminism in Tunisia must be understood as a form of authoritarian governance, instrumentalising women's rights discourses not just as symbolic gestures, but as deliberate political technologies integral to maintaining

regime stability. In this regard, Tunisian state feminism starkly contrasts with Western ideals. This comparative perspective allowed for a richer understanding of how state feminism can function differently across diverse political contexts, highlighting the need for more nuanced analytical frameworks that account for the complexities introduced by authoritarian governance and postcolonial contexts. As Part A of this thesis clearly exhibits, an idiosyncratic version of state feminism was instituted in Tunisia, which was not merely a set of legal and policy reforms, but a political technology deployed to consolidate power, regulate gender roles, and construct a hegemonic national identity. This governance mechanism was instrumentalised differently by Bourguiba and Ben Ali, evolving from a modernistnationalist project into a securitised authoritarian strategy. There thus cannot exist one normative, universal definition of what constitutes state feminism, but it must be considered in relation to the broader context in which it functions.

The historical analysis undertaken in this chapter therefore serves as an essential foundation for subsequent discussions in this thesis, including regarding how the epistemic communities and epistemic CoPs that emerged both during and after the Ben Ali era navigated, contested, and redefined the legacies of state feminism. In doing so, it underscores the importance of contextual specificity when analysing state feminism, recognising the complex interplay between gender, power, and authoritarianism in Tunisia.

Part A

Chapter 3: The State and UNFT – An (Asymmetric) Epistemic Community of Practice

3.1 Introduction

Whilst the previous chapter traced the evolution of Ben Ali's authoritarianism and the ideological function of state feminism, this chapter shifts focus to the agents and practices that sustained that ideology from within, revealing how state feminism functioned as a tool of epistemic control. By monopolising knowledge production on women, the regime claimed legitimacy, entrenched authoritarianism, and neutralised opposing feminist narratives. This analysis addresses Sadiki's (2015) observation that "the reproduction of power through management of knowledge practices and production, including the cultural sphere, is scantily addressed in the field of scholarship on Arab and North African states" (Ibid:703). Sadiki contends that hierarchies forged through state control over culture, ideology, and curriculum can be as enduring as those established through economic or military means.

However, rather than framing this chapter around authoritarian upgrading per se, given the argument, aims, and contributions of this thesis, the core focus is on theorising the epistemic character of *Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne*, or 'National Union of Tunisian Women' (UNFT), as a central factor enabling Ben Ali to instrumentalise women's security policy in service of authoritarian rule. I argue that UNFT operated with a degree of functional autonomy, which enabled it to produce and circulate knowledge on women's security, engage with international partners, and frame policy within certain bounded spaces — even as it remained deeply entangled with, and often instrumentalised by, the Ben Ali regime. The chapter emphasises that Ben Ali solicited UNFT to disseminate a perception of his state as 'feminist' for both domestic and foreign audiences, performing two key functions: first, reinforcing the state's idealised construction of *la Femme*; and second, actively supporting regime security and legitimacy. Putting forward an additional novel argument, the chapter demonstrates how this was facilitated through the formation of an epistemic CoP between Ben Ali's government and UNFT.

I demonstrate how UNFT and the state together constituted “a dominant way of looking at social reality, a set of shared symbols and references, mutual expectations, and a mutual predictability of intention” (Ruggie 1975:569), which enabled them to occasion policy change concerning women, defined by shared practices of “expertise” on women, and designed to perpetuate Ben Ali’s absolute grip on power.

This moves beyond existing superficial treatment of UNFT as ineffective due to state proximity, through presenting a novel reconceptualization of UNFT as both an epistemic community and a participant in an epistemic CoP with the Ben Ali regime. This foregrounds UNFT’s *expert authority*, *knowledge production*, and *institutional practices* as constitutive features of its epistemic role, revealing its active role in the state’s “social processes of negotiating meaning, competence, and background knowledge” (Adler et al. 2024:2). These analyses will be complemented by examining the role of UNFT vis-à-vis the international community, bearing in mind Ben Ali’s aim to depict his regime as “modern, open to the West…in which Islamism had little popular support” (Alexander 2010:116, in McCarthy 2014:3).

I yet remain cognisant of UNFT’s undisputed membership in Tunisian civil society, deploying a dual-layer reading that treats UNFT simultaneously as CSO and epistemic community. These layers were co-constitutive rather than mutually exclusive: state proximity resourced and channelled UNFT’s epistemic work, whilst epistemic authority legitimised and amplified its CSO reach. This dual-layer lens both defuses the CSO/epistemic community binary, and clarifies how UNFT could at once be complicit in reproducing regime narratives and – within bounded technical spaces – capable of shaping them. Analytically, I therefore read UNFT as a site where civilsociety practices and epistemic practices interpenetrate and shift in salience across audiences (domestic/international) and moments, rather than as a unit that must be placed on one side of a dichotomy.

This chapter adopts a multi-layered methodological approach, combining analysis of policy papers and materials published by UNFT and international organisations, with

a close reading of Arabic-language reporting from both state-controlled and independent Tunisian media outlets. Central to this analysis is state-controlled *Agence Tunis Afrique Presse* (TAP), which since its establishment in 1961 has maintained a de facto monopoly on national information and functioned as the official mouthpiece of the Benalist regime, thus offering crucial insight into official framings of UNFT's activities. This is complemented by analysis of independent platforms, notably *Tunisnews* and *Al-Arab*, which offered alternative perspectives and illuminated how UNFT's practices were enacted within the liberal contours of Benalist state feminism. Together, these sources demonstrate how UNFT internalised regime ideologies and reproduced them through participation in the epistemic CoP, a dynamic sustained through communal "routines, sensibilities, and discourse" (Adler and Faubert 2022:53). Additionally, the chapter incorporates contemporaneous English-language reporting by independent, African-focused platform *AllAfrica*, offering an external vantage point on UNFT's role. To further enrich this analysis, original primary data from semi-structured interviews is utilised, including with Radhia Jerbi, a prominent Tunisian lawyer and president of UNFT since 2013. Jerbi was exceptionally well-situated to provide valuable perspectives on UNFT, as a member holding various committee roles since 1996, witnessing firsthand how it operated under Ben Ali. I also reached out to former Ben Ali-era UNFT presidents, whose contact details were provided by Jerbi, but did not receive any responses. This is likely attributable to the backlash against perceived regime loyalists, including well-known UNFT women, after Tunisia's 2011 uprising. Nonetheless, I was able to speak with a UNFT committee member from the period, although she did not consent to her name being published.

Chapter 3 is also structured thematically rather than chronologically. Whilst some historical backtracking occurs, this is intentional, aimed at tracing conceptual continuities across time and situating UNFT's evolving practices within broader epistemic logics. After establishing UNFT's institutional history and relationship with the state, the chapter demonstrates its function as an epistemic community, then advances the argument that it co-produced policy and discourse as part of an epistemic CoP with the regime. The final sections analyse how this CoP shaped Tunisia's modernist vision of *la Femme* and consolidated Ben Ali's international

image — ultimately revealing the centrality of gendered knowledge in the maintenance of authoritarian rule.

Finally, as explicated in this thesis' Introduction, UNFT is not discussed in Part B. However, it is important to note that its absence in the post-2011 chapters does not invalidate its epistemic role under Ben Ali, with Chapter 3 rather demonstrating a distinct model of epistemic community functioning under authoritarianism. It provides a counterpoint to the more autonomous WSECoP organisations explored in later chapters, thereby enriching the typology of epistemic formations under different political regimes. UNFT constitutes an example of what scholars have termed "stateled epistemic communities" (Pratiwi 2024), offering a compelling empirical case, whilst still maintaining elements of professional knowledge production, norm diffusion, and policy influence. As Haas (1992a) notes, epistemic communities can help "define the self-interests of a state" (Ibid:15) – even in highly illiberal systems – and can operate as legitimising actors, making policies more acceptable to domestic and international audiences by cloaking them in technical or scientific expertise. UNFT fulfilled precisely this function during Ben Ali's rule. In this way, this chapter extends Haas' framework into the authoritarian MENA context, a contribution not yet explored in existing literature. Further, as Dunlop (2017) argues, epistemic communities exert influence precisely because they shape the substantive nature of policy arrangements and can act as non-systemic origins of state interests. In Tunisia, UNFT's privileged access to the state apparatus, coupled with its capacity to produce technically-framed, internationally legible knowledge, rendered it both an instrument and source of regime legitimacy. Chapter 3's additional contribution thus lies in demonstrating the varied forms epistemic communities can take, including those that are state-aligned, constrained, or hybrid in function – an insight essential for a comprehensive understanding of epistemic agency in authoritarian and transitional settings.

3.2 UNFT and State Feminism in Ben Ali's Tunisia

UNFT was Ben Ali's "most important or showpiece project" (Brand 1998:53) for promoting women's security, shouldering a far broader agenda compared to

alternative organisations also receiving MAFFEPA funding. These included CREDIF (introduced in Chapter 2), the government-aligned research agency tasked with monitoring women's conditions to provide data to policymakers, which was smaller and less aligned with the state (Ibid). Jerbi clarified this preponderance during our conversation, describing UNFT as *"the heartbeat of Ben Ali's state feminist project, bringing to life his vision for Tunisian women and society"* (Interview, 18 September 2024). Its role thus reflects how policymakers depended on the 'expert knowledge' of epistemic communities – experts defined, in this context, by the Benalist state and its liberal international partners.

3.2.1 UNFT's connection to (and autonomy from) the state

To understand how UNFT functioned both as CSO and epistemic community, its complex relationship with the Benalist state must be unpacked – balancing autonomy with instrumentalisation. As detailed in Chapter 2, Bourguiba established UNFT in 1956 by merging the major women's movements, and as one of Tunisia's oldest women-focused organisations, UNFT was central to nation-building, notably in legal reforms such as the CSP (Arfaoui 2007:56; Brand 1998:53). Its official objectives, still listed on its website, reflect its long-standing role in promoting women's security, including: improving women's status and eliminating discrimination; advancing women in all domains; increasing their presence in decision-making; supporting development and education (especially for dropouts); promoting ICT access; combating poverty; and contributing to world peace (UNFT, n.d.).

Despite these ambitious goals, UNFT is widely viewed in the literature on Tunisian women's organisations as 'Ben Ali's organisation' (Arfaoui 2007), a CSO "dominated by the Party-State" (Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh 2014:21) and a "relay for the social policy of the state" (Ibid). This characterisation was echoed by three of my interviewees – two from women's organisations and one independent activist – who declined to even speak about the organisation due to its *ancién regime* ties. These perceptions originate all the way back from the first UNFT congress in 1958, which was inaugurated "in the name of state feminism" (Borrillo 2019:41), and Bourguiba's

requirement that UNFT members also join his Neo-Destour party. UNFT leadership included Bourguiba's nieces and First Lady Wassila Bourguiba (Yacoubi 2016:263), and under Ben Ali, UNFT was also "taking its budget directly from the RCD" (Brand 1998:65). Structurally, UNFT was highly centralised, with 27 regional delegations and 650 local sections (CMI Report R 2016:5). UNFT's regional delegates gathered at its national council, headed by an executive committee, where each member was responsible for an additional functional committee (Brand 1998). For example, my anonymous interviewee, who joined UNFT at 27 years old, was a member of UNFT's economic committee (1998–2000), followed by foreign affairs committee (2000–2005), which was tasked with promoting UNFT *"as Tunisia's 'leader' women-focused CSO in international affairs"* (Anonymous, personal communication, 03 October 2024). Further, delegates were not elected by the base, but appointed by leadership (Brand 1998). Unsurprisingly, "this top-down approach to decision-making meant that UNFT was controlled by a small group" (Ibid:8) of party-loyalist women, helping UNFT fulfil its function "as a showcase for the proactive policy of the state" (Mahfoudh 2017:21). To this end, Ben Ali staffed UNFT's top echelons with political elite-types, "consisting of Sahel-based, often Francophone middle-classes…[which] succeeded in making his modernist discourse, values, and ideas the cultural norm in broader Tunisian society" (Debuysere 2016:208). For example, RCD party member, jurist, politician, and diplomat Faiza Kefi was serving as UNFT President in the 1990s, before becoming minister of environment and ambassador to France in 1999 (CID 1995; Washington Report 1998; Africa Intelligence 2001).

Nonetheless, the same scholars have also acknowledged UNFT as the main "women's association responsible for implementing the process of emancipation of Tunisian women" (Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh 2014:21) and, despite its repute as a government-aligned organisation, it engaged in welfare, mobilisation, and birth control efforts that supported women's security, and promoted women's participation in decision-making (Arfaoui 2007). Building on these accounts, my research offers a new theorisation of UNFT as an epistemic community – a network of professionals with recognised authority in a particular domain – empirically analysing its critical

role in producing, legitimising, and disseminating gender-related knowledge to further the regime's ideological and political objectives.

Before evidencing UNFT as an epistemic community and participant in a broader epistemic CoP with the Benalist state, it is important to briefly outline moments vindicating it as an autonomous organisation, as opposed to entirely an instrument of the regime, which previous studies have largely neglected to contemplate.[5] This autonomy was not absolute; it operated within the boundaries defined by Ben Ali's authoritarian rule. Nonetheless, this bounded autonomy is precisely what qualified UNFT to function as a participant in an epistemic CoP — as theorised in Chapter 1 — and not merely as an extension of state power.

It is telling that neither Bourguiba nor Ben Ali could simply dissolve UNFT at will. It also existed prior to Bourguiba coming to power, and has persisted beyond Ben Ali's rule. As early as 1970, UNFT's then-President launched a campaign to reform the CSP, although this was eventually quashed by Bourguiba (Brand 1998:19). Following the first 1975 UN conference on women, UNFT became more active in seminars and publications, and in 1979 successfully lobbied for a quota in Tunisia's electoral law. In 1982, it proposed a women's ministry, which was later realised as MAFFEPA (Ibid:24–25). Further, in 1983, UNFT President Fathia Mzali created *'rabitat'* (leagues) for women in various fields, significantly open even to nonmembers of UNFT or Bourguiba's PSD (Ibid). An unprecedented move also occurred in December 1986, when UNFT's executive members called for full independence from the PSD (soon to become Ben Ali's RCD in 1987) (Ibid:60). In 1988, UNFT's national council endorsed autonomy whilst maintaining "cooperation and some ties with the RCD" (Ibid:62), publicly denouncing sexist opinions issued by an RCD parliamentarian, as well as joining forces with the unlicensed ATFD in April 1989 to demonstrate against the perceived Islamist threat and call for no backslide on women's rights (Ibid:57).

[5] There is one exception which I have identified which dedicates space to properly analysing the independent activities of UNFT and considering where and how the organisation displayed autonomy from the state, namely Brand (1998).

UNFT also identified areas where women remained disadvantaged, illustrating its capacity to initiate policy rather than merely implement regime directives. In 1994, it received the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize for reducing female illiteracy rate from 68% in 1975 to 36.3% in 1999 (UNESCO 1998). My interview with the former UNFT foreign affairs committee member also revealed that her committee delivered literacy initiatives for women and girls across Tunisia, regarded a *"worthwhile cause"* by committee members, including a project with UNICEF in 2000 aimed at equipping UNFT centres with contemporary educational tools and resources (Anonymous, personal communication, 03 October 2024). UNFT also pursued the fight against GBV in Tunisia, a problem which the state considered taboo, operating shelters for women and children victims at two UNFT centres in Tunis and Sousse (Ibid), which housed and referred 1,266 cases in 2006; 1,187 cases in 2007; and 420 cases in 2008 (Ibid). As Jerbi also highlighted, UNFT actually opened Tunisia's first GBV shelter in Tunis in 1998, and now operates five nationwide, with a sixth launched in Mandouba in 2024 (Jerbi Interview, 18 September 2024). This underscores UNFT's commitment to independently addressing women's physical security, also demonstrating continuity between past and present activities.

Further evidence of UNFT's autonomy lies in its receiving partial support from international, rather than solely state, funding – most notably from USAID. In the early 1990s, USAID considered UNFT "the most important player among the women's organisations" in Tunisia, funding projects such as the 1991 *Guide Juridique* for women, and 1992 studies on public opinion and media representation (Brand 1998:45–47). The findings were later published in *L'image de la Femme dans la Société Tunisienne*, accompanied by USAID-sponsored seminars on 'Democracy and Environment' involving municipal counsellors, UNFT members, and independents (Ibid). In 1994 MAFFEPA also asked CSOs, including UNFT, to help prepare Tunisia's report for the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women. When CSOs rejected centralised state coordination, UNFT co-founded the 'Rihana' network comprising nine CSOs including ATFD, which used USAID funding to deliver a workshop, video, and pamphlet at the 1995 Beijing Conference (Ibid:49– 90).

Accordingly, despite being perceived largely as a government tool, UNFT's historical longevity and engagement with independent international actors reveal nuanced dynamics of autonomy and agency, highlighting its dual role as both actor and instrument within Ben Ali's regime.

3.2.2 UNFT as an epistemic community

Building on UNFT's nuanced autonomy, I now turn to demonstrating how it functioned as an epistemic community, albeit one operating within a fiercely authoritarian context whilst shaping and legitimising state discourses on women. This theoretical innovation offers a valuable framework for analysing the subtler exercising of authoritarian control through knowledge production and the politics of women's security. Crucially, whilst typically applied in democratic contexts, this study extends its application to authoritarian Tunisia, enhancing theoretical understandings of how epistemic communities serve not only democratic governance, but also authoritarian regime maintenance.

Peter Haas' widely-cited definition describes epistemic communities as a "network of experts with an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within a given domain" (Haas 1992:3). As outlined above, UNFT was certainly recognised as an 'expert' on the 'question of women' in Tunisia through its commissioned studies, policy recommendations, and participation in international forums. Its authority was also affirmed by local and international organisations regarding it as a key women's organisation. UNFT also positively comprised a 'network' and its reach was much larger than that of a traditional CSO – "its offices were to be found throughout the country…from some 13,881 in 1960, its ranks grew to 38,821 in 1969, fell to 26,008 in 1972, but climbed to 57,000 in 1980 and 70,000 in 1984" (Brand 1998:19). By 2000, UNFT reported membership of over 135,000, with a regional office and delegate set up in each of Tunisia's twenty-three governorates (Foster 2019). Jerbi herself stated that she did not consider UNFT as an ordinary CSO but a *"réseau"* – 'system' or 'network' (Jerbi Interview, 18 September 2024) – emphasising its status as Tunisia's largest and oldest women's grouping. She also noted that shortly after

Independence in 1956, UNFT adopted the alternative designation of *"the organisation of 1000 bureaus"* (Ibid), reflecting its vast territorial reach.

Epistemic communities are also distinguished by their reliance on internally validated expert knowledge, unlike actors driven by idealism (advocacy networks), self-interest (corporations), or fixed agendas (lobbying groups) (Cross 2012:142). Whilst this concept has been developed primarily in democratic contexts, this study is amongst the first to examine how epistemic communities operate within authoritarianism,[6] revealing how such alliances can allow them to even flourish within such contexts, whilst helping 'sell' absolute rule as an effective political configuration. A key argument validating UNFT as an epistemic community is also Clunan's insight that "uncertainty about how to respond to complex problems generates demand for informed advice about the causes and interrelationships of particular social or physical processes and the consequences of possible responses" (Clunan n.d.: para 2), with epistemic communities serving as one of the sources of this information. In Tunisia, UNFT articulated women's (in)security with claims to authoritative, consensual knowledge, which domestic and international audiences deemed credible. That authority enabled Ben Ali to package selective 'feminist' policies and style himself a modern, emancipatory leader. Consistent with Haas, epistemic communities supply causal ideas and link normative beliefs that shape state interests (Haas 2001:11579), and – as Cross adds – seek to improve welfare by persuading decision-makers of their shared goals within their domain (Cross 2012). Yet UNFT's expertise was ultimately folded into regime maintenance. It exercised real, if bounded, autonomy within an authoritarian opportunity structure – underscoring Smith's reminder "that not all local actions necessarily lead to greater empowerment and enhanced security" (Smith 2013:94).

This dovetails with Andreas Antoniades' assertion that normative approaches like epistemic communities always lead to "questions such as 'amelioration for whom?', 'in whose terms?' 'according to whose ideas and visions'?", alerting us to how

[6] A study conducted in 2014 by Sean L. Yom theorising that the authoritarian Gulf state monarchies were able to survive the 2011 Arab Spring by virtue of constituting an epistemic community is the only additional piece of research on epistemic communities conducted outside of Western/ democratic settings identified.

epistemic communities are “an integral part of the knowledge/ power equation and…exercise decisive power in the ‘interaction game’ of the construction of (world) politics” (Antoniades 2003:21). Indeed, as this chapter will uncover, UNFT undoubtedly functioned in Tunisia as a ‘power community’ or ‘thought community’ (Antoniades 2003), insofar as the ‘authoritative knowledge’ it held was a product of social context. The key here is “not whether the knowledge has been definitely proven or not, but rather whether it is socially recognised” (Cross 2013:158). Thinking in these terms also hearkens back to Ruggie’s original postulation of epistemic communities, inspired by Foucault’s ‘episteme’, which serves to “delimit for their members the ‘proper’ construction of reality” (Ruggie 1972:69).

3.2.3 UNFT and the Benalist State as an Epistemic CoP

This chapter now applies the epistemic CoPs approach introduced in Chapter 1, which overlaps with the epistemic communities literature whilst capturing both knowledge creation and the practical enactment of policy. By synthesising both approaches, I offer a robust, nuanced model for understanding how knowledge, power, and practice intersected in Ben Ali’s Tunisia.

CoPs are defined as “domains of knowledge that constitute communities of engaging practitioners bound by an interest in learning and performing shared practices” (Adler et al. 2024:1), oftentimes cultivated within institutions (e.g. Ben Ali’s regime). However, they rely upon informality as opposed to formal organisation “because shared practical know-how and practices establish CoPs’ social boundaries” (Ibid:3). Accordingly, they are “the social fabric of relations in action” (Adler et al. 2024:2), with practices viewed as “patterned, meaningful action that knowledgeable actors engage in within a particular organisational context” (Cross 2013:146). The epistemic communities lens alone is insufficient here, as it prioritises knowledge and power, but omits practice. As Adler and Faubert argue, “practices are at the core of what epistemic communities are…knowledge is not a product but is bound with action” (Adler and Faubert 2022:47). By deconstructing UNFT’s practices within the Benalist regime, I show how its agency was embedded in broader social structures (Adler

and Faubert 2022:48), with the state employing UNFT in its knowledge-practicing enterprises on women. This alerts us to how CoPs "can be sites of power struggles" (Adler et al. 2024:23), as the social structures ordering UNFT's practices had their boundaries overwhelmingly established by the Benalist state, subsequently "developing, diffusing, and becoming institutionalised" (Adler and Faubert 2022:52) in Tunisia through co-production with UNFT.

This chapter makes explicit that UNFT's epistemic authority – grounded in its recognised expertise, shared causal beliefs, and capacity to define policy-relevant knowledge (Haas 1992a) – enabled it to function as an epistemic community within a broader epistemic CoP involving the Benalist state and MAFFEPA, from the start of Ben Ali's tenure and up to 2010. Guided by Ruggie's (1975) original conception of epistemic communities, a practice-oriented programme on epistemic communities "will explore practices not only as enacted by agency but also as being intertwined with social structures or 'epistemes'" (Adler and Faubert 2022:48). This is the first study explicitly thinking in such terms, exposing the multi-level power dynamics surrounding the durability of Benalism, as the state constructed its modernist 'la Femme' imaginary, exclusively relying upon UNFT to legitimate this discourse and sustain standards of "normal" behaviour (Ruggie 1975:570). Simplistically viewing UNFT as ineffectual due to its "proximity to the party in power" (Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh 2014:29) has thus represented a missed opportunity to bring to the fore the central role it played in Ben Ali's centralisation of power. This CoP, being "sustained by a repertoire of communal resources and shared background knowledge" (Adler et al. 2024:1) represented "the social fabric of relations in action" (Ibid), involving the construction of a self-preservationist truth regime. At the same time, it yet involved UNFT functioning as an epistemic community, featuring Haas' four defining characteristics for epistemic communities (shared normative and causal beliefs, shared notions of validity, and a common policy enterprise) (Haas 1992a:3), along with being defined by a specific social reality and based on the logic that its "life depends on the social interactions and the outcome of social struggles, which 'produce' that reality" (Antoniades 2003:28), and thus is conceived of here as an *epistemic* CoP. This classification does not negate UNFT's role in reinforcing regime

legitimacy, nor obscures its complicity in authoritarian upgrading. It instead crucially establishes the CSO's epistemic credentials: it engaged in research, training, agenda-setting, norm advocacy, and international diplomacy in ways that fulfilled the definitional criteria for an epistemic community (Haas 1992).

The ideas of Michel Foucault are exceedingly useful to consider here, having influenced early epistemic community theorists. Foucault's (1977) theorising of discourse as the power/knowledge nexus helps illuminate the asymmetries within the Benalist state/UNFT CoP, which produced political spaces that included certain groups and ideas whilst excluding others. Foucault's insight that a particular knowledge is valid in a particular context and by relations of power (Lucknow University 2020:34) played out as Ben Ali sought to entrench his rule by constructing a discourse around the ideal Tunisian woman and instrumentalising women's security, largely through UNFT. Foucault's view that power constitutes the very subjects it acts upon helps reveal the "complicated ways in which women's experiences, selfunderstandings, and capacities are constructed in and by the power relations which they are seeking to transform" (Armstrong n.d.: para 5). As Foucault argued, power always contains "points of insubordination which, by definition, are means of escape" (Foucault 1982:225, in Brighenti 2010:100). Accordingly, a power relation is not an entirely top-down imposition (originating entirely from the Benalist state), but also depends upon actors internal to it (in this case UNFT) and "an associated foundation of accepted knowledge" (Smith 2013:87), which as an epistemic CoP, was demonstrably present.

However, curiously, UNFT would not attempt to pursue a 'means of escape'. This alerts us to the "Foucauldian rationales of governmentality" (Ibid), including 'disciplinary power' wielded by governments over human life through "formulating policy that focuses on the shared 'needs' or 'conditions' of populations" (Ibid), such as Ben Ali's state feminism. These disciplinary structures are often interiorised in authoritarian states, "such that citizens, ultimately, oversee their own conduct through self-discipline" (Wilson 2009:34, in Smith 2013:87). Examining UNFT's state-aligned statements and practices, undertaken below, reveals exactly how UNFT itself reinforced the power relations normalised by the Benalist state, prolonging the

dominance of the state. What is done in a CoP is the "more intimate aspect of knowing *how*, which drives the social underpinnings of knowledge considered objective…a communities of practice analysis adds a focus on how learning in a group affects the practice they all perform" (Bicchi 2022: 36-37).

The utility of the epistemic CoP

Whilst UNFT was a political organisation in its own right under Ben Ali (see Section 3.2.1 above; Kallander 2021; Goulding 2009; Arfaoui 2007; Marzouki 1992), the political structure of a state can and does influence what groups demand "and how they go about making those demands" (Sahadevan and Devotta 2006:111). Indeed, UNFT closely aligned itself with state power, its president served on the RCD's central committee, and most members joined from RCD ranks (Brand 1998:64). UNFT's praxis also reflected what Turkish sociologist Deniz Kandyoti termed "patriarchal bargaining", wherein women operate within state-enacted 'rules of the game' to augment their positions within masculinized systems (Kandyoti 1988:280). Laura Brand also discussed this, observing that "women tended to join [UNFT] for reasons related to ambition – belonging to the party and the union could only be viewed positively by the relevant powers" (Brand 1998:15), and uncovering how "the leadership…were themselves in effect dictated to by the state" (Ibid:18). My interviewed former UNFT member confirmed that *"my role as a foreign affairs committee member opened up many doors…I was able to secure employment with the American Embassy and got paid in dollars"* (Anonymous, personal communication, 03 October 2024). Jerbi likewise recalled how UNFT women were expected to mobilise publicly during election campaigns, attending rallies and appearing prominently in televised events to project broad-based female support for Ben Ali, noting that *"some women knew and accepted this as part of their position"* (Jerbi Interview, 18 September 2024). Her account is supported by a 2010 *Tunisnews* article, reporting how UNFT issued a statement on 30 July 2010 formally endorsing Ben Ali's contested 2014–2019 presidential candidacy, hailing him as "the guarantor of the continuity of the reform, reconstruction, and development process" (Tunisnews 2010, translation mine).

'Patriarchal bargaining' also characterised the leadership of Radhia Haddad, UNFT's president from its inception to 1972. In 1956, she endorsed Bourguiba's decision to restrict UNFT membership to Neo-Destour women, securing her leadership position (Arfaoui 2007:56). In 1987, she declared in support of Ben Ali:

> *"Our strength is first in the President's support… and men's support as a whole. We would have been powerless without their understanding. I am against an extreme feminism; we mustn't fight against men but against all forms of underdevelopment"* (Kallander 2021:5).

This reflects how UNFT and the state qualified as an epistemic CoP, "building common objects of interests and a shared understanding of the purposes of the group and of appropriate forms of participation" (Akrich 2010:4). Haddad's language hints at how, once Ben Ali had consolidated power, he would quickly rely on UNFT to stabilise social order in Tunisia and reinforce a liberal truth regime of *Tunisianité* – although this alliance was never announced as formal state policy, reflecting the 'informality' of CoPs. As an organisation which enjoyed participation from Tunisian women across different regions and socio-economic backgrounds, UNFT was undoubtedly a compelling tool for stifling potentially incendiary ideas threatening to upset traditional family models and state-sanctioned Islam, and for reconfiguring politics into a contest over state power, Tunisian identity, and cultural dominance. This draws our attention to how knowledge is produced within epistemic CoPs, including Akrich's pertinent insight that "the experience they mobilise is more individual, bodily, and provides a basis on which new knowledge can be built" (2010:8). After foregrounding epistemic communities and considering UNFT and the Benalist state as an epistemic CoP, we can see the regime relying upon UNFT's "political/symbolic knowledge" (Kourtelis 2021), which Kourtelis argues is used by leaders to advance "an agenda of which the aims are already decided by policymakers" (Ibid:4). UNFT also became an equally useful device for Tunisia to 'prove' its modern status to the West, through its pursuit of 'feminist' policies, albeit state-directed ones. This accords with policymakers' use of the "instrumental knowledge" (Ibid) of epistemic communities to gain access to their legitimating technical expertise, at the same time as making them aware of "the aims

of their agenda" (Ibid:5). Further, since women's security was central to the regime's security discourse, this illustrates how "influential epistemic communities may impact policy goals even when the issue seems quite certain" (Cross 2013:151). Thinking in terms of epistemic CoPs thus enables an account of vertical/top-down systems of power, such as state feminism detailed in Chapter 2, in concert with horizontal/ascending/bottom-up ones, exemplified by UNFT's security creation efforts for women, which I will now discuss.

3.3 UNFT, 'Tunisianité', and 'la Femme Tunisienne'

This section examines how the epistemic CoP comprising UNFT and the state coproduced hegemonic discourses on Tunisian femininity (*la Femme*) and national identity (*Tunisianité)*. As the previous chapter discussed, this particular vision of women was central to Ben Ali's modernist vision of Tunisia, symbolising a secular, moderate state through the figure of the 'emancipated' woman. UNFT was a key actor involved in promoting this image, playing "an important role in rendering the image of 'la Femme' hegemonic" (Debuysere 2016:209) both domestically and internationally – reinforcing not only the state's cultural narrative, but also its authoritarian foundations.

3.3.1 UNFT within the epistemic CoP

Within the epistemic CoP, UNFT primarily played a consultative/enabling role vis-àvis state feminism, focused upon formulating programs and development projects *"whose parameters were set by the government"* (Jerbi Interview, 18 September 2024), although wielding the potential for wide mobilisation. With its leadership privy to the same "socioeconomic privileges and largely francophone cultural orientation of the national elite" (Kallander 2021:38), UNFT's policies "echoed the outlines of the state's liberal rights-based feminism" (Ibid). This hearkens to Bicchi's (2022) classification of CoPs as "groups of people knit together by a common…endeavour, who enjoy doing it well and develop a set of tools to continue doing it well" (Bicchi 2022:24).

Yet UNFT's ability to occupy this enabling role also derived from its epistemic credentials: it was recognised as possessing authoritative, policy-relevant knowledge on women's security, a defining feature of epistemic communities (Haas 1992). For example, a 2010 UN report summarised UNFT's activities as involving sponsoring "social integration of women through two reception and orientation centres for women in distress; economic integration of women through 250 vocational centres and the microcredit system since 2005; and organization of educational caravans and training programmes for women" (UN Economic and Social Council 2010). Concerning women's physical security, UNFT's 1991 nationwide study on conjugal violence represented not only participation in MAFFEPA's implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, but also its epistemic role in producing causal knowledge about the roots and scope of GBV — knowledge which policymakers then used to frame subsequent interventions (MAFFEPA 2005). UNFT's centre for threatened and abused women was also opened in 2003, in light of the 1991 study's recommendations, followed by a sexual harassment and domestic violence hotline in 2004 (Ben Salem 2010). Further, in 1994, UNFT was awarded the UNESCO prize for literacy for its efforts in bolstering women's economic security through reducing their illiteracy rates from 68% in 1975 to 36.3% in 1999, as well as made available its regional facilities to help mobilise rural women in the implementation of Tunisia's National Adult Education Programme, initiated in 2000 (EUROMED 2010). Such activities reflected UNFT's capacity to frame social problems and propose authoritative remedies, consistent with Haas' (1992a) conception of epistemic communities as shaping both problem definition and policy response.

Reflecting on these activities, Jerbi explained that upon taking leadership of UNFT in 2013, she attempted to introduce projects that – in her view – would genuinely empower women, such as programmes focused on women's social and political participation and sexual education (Jerbi Interview, 18 September 2024). However, she discovered that none of the existing UNFT staff from Ben Ali's era possessed experience delivering such initiatives. Instead, particularly in Benalism's latter years, it had become critical for UNFT's projects to align closely with the priorities and expectations of the international community, as per MAFFEPA's preferences (Ibid).

This dynamic illustrates how UNFT's epistemic authority was socially recognised but bounded, resonating with Cross' (2013) observation that epistemic legitimacy rests on recognition within prevailing structures of power. Consequently, Jerbi admitted that UNFT predominantly implemented liberal-oriented projects attended mostly by Francophone women from Tunis, which were not necessarily tailored to the broader and more diverse needs of all Tunisian women (Ibid), confirming the extent to which UNFT fulfilled an enabling role vis-à-vis Benalist state feminism, helping actualise Ben Ali's envisioned ideal of 'la Femme'. Jerbi did qualify this however by highlighting that UNFT's literacy workshops were attended by hundreds of women, primarily in Tunis and other major cities such as Sousse, appearing both popular and relevant (Ibid).

Discernibly, evoking Haas, UNFT and the state acted as "a network of actors who share policy orientations in the sense of a certain definition of the problems at stake along with possible ways of solving them" (Akrich 2010:2). What rendered UNFT central in this network was precisely its epistemic role: its production of studies, policy proposals, and technical expertise allowed it to speak authoritatively, thereby feeding into Ben Ali's truth regime. Indeed, with UNFT, the state "could show that a "feminist" policy (free access to contraception and abortion, access to training and studies, access to salaried work and public life) could go hand in hand with the preservation of certain family and social values" (Mahfoudh 2017:21). Remarks made by Ben Ali on International Women's Day in March 2007, identified through research of the Arabic-language archives of *Al-Arab*, markedly encapsulate this narrative. Addressing UNFT's then-president, he described women "as the symbol of Tunisia's progress and its cultural standing among nations" (Al-Arab 2007, translation mine). This was followed by a statement that Tunisian women, following the example set by UNFT, have become "a distinguished model in their environment, with their presence in various positions of responsibility and decision-making, and in every workplace, activity, and production" (Ibid). Ben Ali then considered that the important position occupied by Tunisian women came after "we [the state and UNFT] completed the components of their partnership with men and their equality with them in rights and duties" (Ibid), enabling them to contribute effectively to consolidating the

pillars of “a society of equality, tolerance, and moderation” (Ibid). Such declarations illustrate clearly how UNFT women became instrumental actors in embedding and reproducing the state’s ‘la Femme’ vision, but they also reveal why UNFT qualified as an epistemic community: it was precisely because of its recognised authority to define women’s “problems” and propose socially validated “solutions” that Ben Ali could mobilise its expertise in service of authoritarian upgrading.

Nonetheless, my anonymous interviewee who formerly served on various UNFT committees offered valuable nuance, explaining that there existed genuine belief amongst UNFT members that Ben Ali was sincerely committed to enhancing women’s security. Reflecting on this complexity, she remarked: *“It is not impossible for an authoritarian regime to be benevolent, you know”* (Anonymous, personal communication, 03 October 2024). Nonetheless, she also readily acknowledged the regime’s authoritarianism and UNFT’s role in soft-pedalling it, recalling that *“especially those with ranks in the organisation were eager to please the president and saw their personal fortunes tied in with his…whilst we knew that we were improving women’s security through our programmes, justifications were always found when news surfaced about the repression faced by one group or the other”* (Ibid). This justification dynamic was reflected in contemporaneous media coverage. For example, an October 2008 report published by *Tunisnews* quoted Iman Belhadi, a representative of UNFT’s female youth section, defending the regime’s securityoriented approach to countering extremism as a *“necessary evil”* (Tunisnews 2008, translation mine), in response to criticisms regarding its heavy reliance on security measures. This rhetoric illustrates the way UNFT members articulated the broader legitimisation of Ben Ali’s security practices. The epistemic CoPs framework provides a novel, powerful lens to analyse the alliances, motivations, and concealed logics behind these discourses, offering deeper insight into how authoritarianism and women’s security were co-constructed in Tunisia. UNFT women evidently became crucial actors in reinforcing the cultural foundations underpinning authoritarianism, amounting to what my anonymous interviewee characterised above as “softpedalling”.

Contributing to the Benalist state’s construction of its image as “enlightened” and

“developmentalist” (Brand 1998:53), in August 1998, on the occasion of National Women’s Day in Tunisia, UNFT sponsored a debate in the area of women’s economic security, titled “Women and Future Professions”, which examined how women could reap the professional opportunities afforded by globalization and technological development (AFNWS 1998). A report by *AllAfrica* on the debate revealed that participants included specialists on social issues and labour affairs, who highlighted the efforts of UNFT training centres to “try to balance both the economic and social roles of women in Tunisian society” (Ibid), as well as Neziha Zarrouk, the delegate minister to the prime minister in charge of women and family affairs. In her speech, Zarrouk “commended Ben Ali for the initiatives his government has undertaken” (Ibid) to support UNFT’s training of Tunisian women, securing their involvement in “professions of the future” (Ibid).

These efforts, as described by my anonymous former UNFT committee member interviewee, were explicitly guided by directives to align women’s roles within the broader neoliberal economic orientation envisioned by Ben Ali’s administration. Reflecting on her experience at UNFT training centres, she recalled that agendas and curricula required prior approval from MAFFEPA, which routinely edited out content perceived as problematic (Anonymous, personal communication, 03 October 2024). Human rights language or messages empowering women to believe *“they could be anything they wanted”* (Ibid) were regularly removed, replaced instead by technocratic and politically neutral language. Moreover, she highlighted the significant emphasis placed on secularising the language and content of training programmes, to the extent that trainers were specifically coached to identify and report potential Islamist sympathisers (Ibid). Whilst she herself did not directly witness such reporting, she was certain it occurred, particularly against women who chose to wear the headscarf (Ibid). Such undertakings undoubtedly reinforced the state’s feminist project centred on ‘la Femme’, with this constructed image integral to Ben Ali’s strategy of positioning the state as both guardian and architect of modernity and secularism. Yet, they also demonstrated UNFT’s epistemic authority to define the “appropriate” solutions to the social question of women’s work and education. By producing and validating technocratic curricula, UNFT acted in line with Haas’

argument that epistemic communities shape state preferences by generating socially recognised “causal” and “normative” knowledge — in this case, that modern Tunisian women should be integrated into the labour market in state-sanctioned ways.

The same policy orientation could be detected within UNFT over a decade later, in 2010, when UNFT’s National Women’s Day statement praised “the gains made in Tunisia at the Era of the Change under the judicious leadership of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali” (TAP 2010), highlighting its gratitude to Ben Ali “for the major interest he takes in women and the sustained care he lavishes on them” (Ibid). Revealingly, UNFT’s statement instructed women to, in return, “meet the expectations of President Ben Ali, out of their keenness to preserve the vanguard gains made for their benefit” (Ibid). This calls attention to the unambiguous role of UNFT as a tool of authoritarian upgrading. Reporting by *Al-Arab* from 2009 also touted the “gains” with headline figures – girls’ primary enrolment above 99% at school-entry age and female higher-education rates around 59% (Al-Arab 2009). In line with the nuanced reality underpinning this analysis, Jerbi recalled during our conversation a visit by Ben Ali to UNFT headquarters early during his rule, where he repeatedly emphasised the critical importance of education and expressed his determination to eradicate female illiteracy in Tunisia (Jerbi Interview, 18 September 2024). According to her, he *“seemed genuine”* (Ibid) in these assertions, thus reinforcing the complexity of liberal authoritarianism discussed above.

However, in the same article, *Al-Arab* also reported on Leila Ben Ali’s statement from a July 2007 press conference organised by UNFT on the topic of Ben Ali’s advancement of women, wherein the First Lady exclaimed that “this momentum of gains achieved by women, including many from UNFT, has made them a prominent symbol of modernity in Tunisian society, a firm pillar of its authentic identity, a solid bulwark for the values and ancient civilizational principles of Tunisian society, and an impregnable wall against extremism, fanaticism, and isolation in all its forms” (Ibid, translation mine). This rhetoric shows how UNFT actors disseminated and reinforced hegemonic narratives, advancing authoritarian upgrading through gendered knowledge practices. Leila Ben Ali’s further declaring during the same conference

that “women in Tunisia are now considered…an integral part of our ambitious civilizational project” (Ibid) also attests to how, as noted by CoPs scholars, “activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning” (Lave and Wenger 1991:53). At the same time, it underscores UNFT’s epistemic function: through policy framing and the production of legitimating knowledge, UNFT fulfilled what Cross (2013:158) describes as the social recognition of epistemic authority — not necessarily because its knowledge was empirically “true”, but because it was acknowledged as authoritative by both domestic elites and international actors.

Further exhibiting how “knowledge production takes place within…communities of practice made of people who are engaged in similar activities and communicate regularly on these activities” (Akrich 2010:2), in May 2010, Tunisia’s minister of vocational training and employment presided over a signing ceremony of two agreements between the Regional Office of Education and Family and UNFT, offering 140 university graduates from the governorate of Kebili contracts for inclusion in various training programs (AFNWS 2010). These agreements came under the framework of the voluntary civil service program launched by Ben Ali in 2009, which aimed to integrate 10,000 youth into the labour market, in concert with civil society groups (Ibid). A previous agreement under this program had also been signed in April 2010 between the Ministry of Vocational Training and Employment and UNFT, in which UNFT committed to hosting young women graduates under employment contracts until the end of 2010 (Ibid). As part of the signing of this latter agreement, *AllAfrica*’s reporting presented the following assessment of the position of the then-President of UNFT, Salwa Ben Attia:

> “For her part, Mrs. Salwa Terzi Ben Attia…evoked the role of choice granted by the President of the Republic to Tunisian women. She highlighted the efforts of Mrs. Leila Ben Ali, the spouse of the Head of State, to make better known the achievements for the benefit of Tunisian women” (Ibid).

TAP’s coverage of UNFT similarly focused upon the role of the organisation in sponsoring the economic security of women. In March 2010, the agency reported on

Tunisia's 27th women-led handicrafts fair inaugurated by Tunisia's prime minister at the time, Mohamed Ghannouchi, and organised by the National Handicrafts Board, detailing how Ghannouchi visited the stand set up by graduates of UNFT's training centre, craftswomen working in UNFT's regional sections, and additional beneficiaries of UNFT credits (TAP 2010). In the words of Tunisia's MAFFEPA minister in 2010, Bebia Bouchnak Chihi, women evidently held a "privileged position in President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's thought and in the reforming and modernist project of Tunisia" (Ibid).

According to Akrich's (2010) theorising on CoPs, "from a certain point of view, one can even say that the 'community' only exists through the production of a collective discursive object" (Ibid). As the above evidence demonstrates, the Benalist state and UNFT were engaged in constructing the common discursive object of 'la Femme', or the Tunisian woman which "embodied independence and progressive modernity" (Kallander 2021:41). Through UNFT, Ben Ali was able to foment his modernist project's emphasis upon women's 'rehabilitation', as opposed to their 'liberation', which was considered "as an assimilationist threat to Tunisian identity" (Ibid:42) and therefore the stability of the regime. Revealingly, in his address at the opening of the 13th Congress of UNFT in April 2010, held in Sousse, Ben Ali offered the following statement:

> "Our consideration for UNFT, and the care and support we provide to it, are part of our strategic reliance on women who represent a cornerstone in our civilisational project, and an active partner in all our choices" (TAP 2010).

The Congress, which was themed around 'Tunisian Women, Ambitions, Stakes, and Prospects', highlighted UNFT's support for the government's endeavours to advance women's conditions whilst "reinforcing their role in educating young generations, ensuring family stability, and increasing income sources" (TAP 2010), through social and economic security-generating efforts. These efforts aligned with the state's visions of the new modern nation's interests and women's security, "where the best

way for a woman to exercise her rights was to ‘make herself useful to the nation’” (Kallander 2021:41).

As this section has made manifest, in actuality, activities such as those practiced by UNFT came to constitute microcosmic trends betraying how liberal power regimes can flourish within the area of human security. Thinking in terms of epistemic CoPs thus demonstrably elevates our understanding of the politics of regime preservation and security creation in Tunisia, through grounding the empirical investigation of certain policies, such as state feminism, upon the political, social, and economic structures and agents involved in their generation (Smith 2013:98). Yet equally, reframing UNFT as an epistemic community grounds these empirical insights in the literature’s emphasis on networks of recognised expertise “responsible for aggregating and articulating knowledge in terms of state interests” (Badie et al. 2011:788). This dual positioning — as both epistemic community and participant in the epistemic CoP — illuminates Antoniades’ (2003) insight that epistemic communities are “integral to the knowledge/power equation” and exercise decisive influence in shaping social realities.

In addition, only a few months later in August 2010, UNFT underlined “with pride the gains made in Tunisia at the Era of Change under the judicious leadership” (TAP 2010) of Ben Ali, publishing a statement on the occasion of the 54th anniversary of the CSP to express “consideration and gratitude to President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali for the major interest he takes in women and the sustained care he lavishes on them” (Ibid). This was credited as “an additional motivation for Tunisian women to meet the expectations of President Ben Ali, out of their keenness to preserve the vanguard gains made for their benefit” (Ibid). Revealingly, UNFT also pledged the ongoing commitment of its ‘activists’ “to back up the efforts of the First Lady of Tunisia to promote the status of women” (Ibid), demonstrating the extent of the collective learning which took place within the epistemic CoP to constitute UNFT’s experiential knowledge, operating mode, and cognitive resources on which they relied (Akrich 2010:8). At the same time, this learning illustrates how UNFT fulfilled the definitional criteria of an epistemic community: developing shared causal beliefs

about the advancement of women, validating technocratic rather than rights-based approaches, and pursuing a common policy enterprise oriented around regime preservation. In this way, UNFT was not merely a symbolic partner but a central epistemic actor, whose expert authority was indispensable to authoritarian upgrading.

UNFT also occasionally engaged in attempts to mitigate or minimise Ben Ali's authoritarian excesses. This insight was not only provided by my former UNFT committee member interviewee, but is also substantiated by contemporaneous media reporting. A striking example is found in a March 2010 Arabic-language article published by *Tunisnews*, which detailed an incident on International Women's Day from that year. According to this report, 25 organisations constituting the Tunisia Monitoring Group on Freedom of Expression (IFEX-TMG)[7] sent a letter to the UN urging scrutiny of ongoing "violations of women's rights in Tunisia" (Tunisnews 2010, translation mine). The letter, which was first obtained by global Islamic website *IslamOnline*, emphasised the "defamation and abuse faced by women journalists and activists in Tunisia" (Ibid), explicitly describing such abuses as "a cause for concern" (Ibid). IFEX accused Tunisian authorities of systematic harassment and smear campaigns executed through state-backed media channels, which vilified female activists as homosexuals, prostitutes, and traitors funded by foreign entities (Ibid). Notably, according to *Tunisnews*, UNFT issued its own statement on the same Women's Day, praising Ben Ali's regime for establishing, from its inception, "a comprehensive system of social legislation dedicated to human rights, particularly those related to the family, women, and children" (Ibid). Aziza Htira, then-president of UNFT, also highlighted "the initiatives and measures taken for women during Ben Ali's rule, including the constitution, the CSP, labour and nationality laws, and penal codes, in order to preserve the dignity of men and women equally and enshrine the concept of equality and partnership between them in the family and society" (Ibid). In reaction, Ben Ali expressed gratitude to Htira, lauding Tunisia as a "pioneer" due to

[7] IFEX-TMG belongs to the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX), a global network of NGOs that promotes and defends the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

its early recognition and reformist approach to women's issues, emphasising an intellectual and social heritage grounded in "liberation, enlightenment, modernisation, tolerance, and moderation" (Ibid). This position of UNFT, involving the soft-pedalling of state repression directed towards women who deviated from the prescribed statefeminist narrative, thusly encapsulates several core arguments and themes of this chapter: UNFT's pivotal role in constructing and reinforcing the state's vision of 'la Femme', its instrumentalisation as a vehicle of authoritarian upgrading; and, crucially, the epistemic authority that enabled it to function as both a knowledge producer and a legitimising actor within the asymmetric epistemic CoP linking successive generations of UNFT women and the Tunisian state.

3.3.2 UNFT's international activities and policy implementation within the CoP

UNFT also came to play a consultative role in the international arena, leveraging its epistemic credentials to claim authority on women's security issues. This international recognition reinforced its standing as an epistemic community (Cross 2013), whilst also serving Benalism's power-knowledge dynamics. In many ways, the international plane of power was equally crucial to the Benalist state's self-preserving impulses, as Ben Ali "tried to distract the attention from numerous violations of human rights in his country by manifesting himself in the West as protector of women's rights" (Debuysere 2016:212). The 'la Femme' imaginary of his state feminism would come to play an explicitly diplomatic role, leading former UNFT head Radhia Haddad to describe UNFT as "the vitrine of the political regime for foreign audiences" (Kallander 2021:42) in the 1970s.

Between September 1991 and February 1995, UNFT was a key participant in the 'Women in Development' project contract "Technical Assistance for Gender Analysis in Strategic Development Projects", funded by the Consortium for International Development and the Office of Women in Development of the Bureau for Global Programs (CID 1995). The project's research program stressed women's social and economic security, and focused upon women and education, community awareness of women's legal rights, professional development in agricultural and natural resources/environment, and on women as entrepreneurs (Ibid). This involvement

affirmed UNFT's epistemic role as a recognised source of causal and normative knowledge on women's socio-economic conditions.

Further, in 2002, UNFT was granted general consultative status by the UN, and between 2002 and 2008, launched efforts in numerous areas delineated by the UN as pertinent to women's security. Concerning the UN's focus on 'promoting gender equality and empowering women', UNFT staged 457 classes throughout Tunisia in 2007 for rural girls who had dropped out of school, as well as worked with MAFFEPA to alter school textbooks to promote gender equality (UN Economic and Social Council 2008). In relation to the UN's goal of ensuring environmental sustainability, in 2008, UNFT also launched a project titled "Women and the Protection of Forests", as well as organized a workshop themed around "training of facilitators for the community monitoring of the impact of pesticides on health and on the environment" (UN Economic and Social Council 2010). These examples highlight UNFT's role in generating policy-relevant expertise and framing technical solutions to social and environmental problems — precisely the kind of authoritative knowledge production that distinguishes epistemic communities from other forms of advocacy networks (Cross 2013).

Providing further insight into these UN-supported activities, my former UNFT committee member interviewee reflected that projects like these were warmly received by UNFT members, who saw them as genuinely beneficial to women and girls (Anonymous, personal communication, 03 October 2024). However, she also revealed that despite their enthusiasm for the work, UNFT staff regularly faced oversight from MAFFEPA, which *"could randomly show up and sit-in at project content and implementation sessions"* (Ibid). She recalled one incident related to an environmental sustainability project where rights-based language was 'toned down', noting: *"We were explicitly told to remove the phrase 'women's right to hold the state accountable for environmental harms', because such language was perceived as too provocative or sensitive by the Ministry"* (Ibid). This account demonstrates the complexities and constraints UNFT encountered in its efforts, illustrating how the organisation's epistemic authority was conditional and monitored, resonating with

Dunlop's (2017) point that epistemic advice is filtered through prevailing structures of power and uncertainty.

In line with the nuanced perspective outlined earlier, it is plausible that such projects involved a genuine commitment by Ben Ali to enhance the status and human security of Tunisian women. However, the evidence gathered from interviews, archival media research, and secondary literature, indicates that a stronger impulse was for these projects to "embody the gendered legitimacy of the state to global audiences" (Kallander 2021:64), so much so that "when asked in which Arab or Islamic country women's status is most advanced, Arab women are virtually unanimous in naming Tunisia" (Brand 1998:2). This perception was significantly enhanced through internationally-oriented events organised by UNFT, such as a 2005 National Symposium titled "The Tunisian Family: From Haddad's Dream to Ben Ali's Achievements" – 'Haddad' referring to former UNFT head Radhia Haddad – in which participants included representatives from across the Arab region (Al-Arab 2006; Middle East Online 2006). According to Arabic-language news reporting by *Middle East Online*, the Secretary-General of the Arab Family Organisation, Huda Ben Youssef, explicitly praised Tunisian legislation on family and women's issues as "the most progressive, modern, and best suited to the spirit of the age" (Middle East Online 2006, translation mine), highlighting it as an inspirational model for other Arab states (Ibid). In answer, as reported by *Al-Arab*, UNFT exclaimed that "everyone is aware that Tunisia's pioneering achievements in women's advancement make this country's experience a worthy reference for inspiration" (Al-Arab 2009, translation mine). Evidently, UNFT's hosting of such events functioned strategically as an international showcase for Tunisia's national commitment to "modernity, development, moderation, and tolerance" (Middle East Online 2006, translation mine), thereby reinforcing Ben Ali's image as a modernising authority, deeply committed to women's empowerment. At the same time, these events underscored UNFT's epistemic community role: its ability to frame Tunisia as a global exemplar depended on the international recognition of its expertise and authority.

Indeed, in April 2010, during UNFT's 13th Congress mentioned above, it is striking that international guests "expressed admiration at the cohesion of Tunisian women,

all generations included, around President Ben Ali's modernist choices" (TAP 2010). High praise was also issued to Leila Ben Ali, "lauding her efforts to hoist women's position and consolidate their presence in the Arab development process" (Ibid), who was also awarded the Shield of the Arab Women Organisation by the Lebanese Women's Council Chairwoman, Kabbara Chaarini. For her part, the Secretary General of the Chinese Women's Union Zhang Jing exclaimed that the accomplished status of Tunisian women "testifies to the soundness of his [Ben Ali's] programmes and policies aimed to consecrate gender equality" (Ibid). Similarly, Beatrice Pottier, the Chairwoman of the Francophone Women's Council in Belgium "emphasised the achievements accomplished for Tunisian women thanks to the Head of State's care to reinforce and develop legislation for women's benefit, pointing notably to the objective of raising women's presence rate in decision-making positions" (Ibid).

Such statements reflect the strength of the hegemonic discourses associated with Benalist state feminism to reframe the concept of women's security and agency in Tunisia, as the international became a productive site for reinforcing and cultivating UNFT's and the state's "specific configurations of meaningful performances" (Adler et al. 2024:10). These produced "authoritative social competence" (Ibid) capable of organising world politics — but crucially, they depended upon UNFT's epistemic authority as a recognised source of knowledge about women in Tunisia. In Antoniades' (2003) terms, UNFT functioned as a "thought community", producing socially validated truths that underpinned the regime's legitimacy abroad.

To further underline these dynamics, Jerbi revealed during our interview that UNFT was frequently tasked by Ben Ali himself with representing Tunisia at international events and conferences (Jerbi Interview, 18 September 2024). She recalled instances, which were recounted to her after the 2011 uprising, when Ben Ali personally selected which UNFT leaders would speak at global forums, often instructing them on the precise messages and discourses to convey (Ibid). As summed up cogently by one former UNFT leader to Jerbi in 2012, whose identity was not shared by Jerbi, *"We knew we were ambassadors for Tunisia, but it was*

clear that we were also ambassadors for the President's vision" (Ibid). These directives clearly illustrate the power asymmetries within this epistemic CoP, wherein UNFT leaders operated primarily as implementers of Ben Ali's political objectives, legitimising his regime internationally through their participation in global feminist networks and platforms. However, they also confirm UNFT's epistemic community functioning: its capacity to "speak the language" of expertise and project authoritative knowledge on women's advancement is what rendered it a credible international ambassador from the outset (Haas 1992). In other words, the CoP's international legitimacy rested squarely on UNFT's epistemic authority.

A similar international social reality could be perceived during an October 2010 visit by a Syrian delegation of state ministers to UNFT's Tunis headquarters, the purpose of which was to "get to know the Tunisian experience in matters of promotion of women's rights" (TAP 2010). The ministers were informed by Saloua Terzi Ben Attia, UNFT president, RCD party member, and Secretary of State for Children and the Elderly at the time, on "UNFT objectives and fields of its intervention in backing up state efforts to enhance women's guidance, strengthen their rights and preserve their gains" (Ibid). In response, the agency's reporting from the time indicated that the Syrian delegation "pointed to the high consideration enjoyed by the Tunisian experience in the area of women's promotion nationally, regionally, and internationally" (Ibid). In epistemic terms, this exchange highlights UNFT's function as a transmitter of policy-relevant knowledge, packaging Tunisian state feminism as an exportable model and diffusing it across regional epistemic networks.

To a certain extent, UNFT had thus clearly successfully fulfilled its mandate of legitimising the state on an international level through its participation in international efforts to engender women's security. The TAP was deployed to actively cover all of these efforts, describing for example a 2009 meeting held by UNFT in Italy, wherein UNFT chairwoman reminded the audience "of the honourable ratings awarded by different international authorities to Tunisia thanks to its pertinent choices" (TAP 2009). These ratings had been a key point of focus for Ben Ali and his efforts to sustain his one-man rule, who stressed Tunisia's ranking "first among African

countries, and is ranked better than a number of European, Asian, and American countries" (AFNWS 2005) in index ranking on women's economic progress by the World Economic Forum. By invoking such technocratic rankings, UNFT was not only echoing the state's discursive framing but also exercising epistemic authority in Haas's sense — producing and circulating knowledge claims that appeared scientific, neutral, and benchmarked, thereby enhancing Tunisia's credibility in international fora.

In April 2010, Tunisia also hosted the Arab Conference on 'Beijing+15 and Beyond', centred upon the 'Future Process of Arab Women Empowerment', where UNFT – as *"the only women's organisation allowed visibility at such events at the time"* (Jerbi Interview, 18 September 2024) – highlighted to delegations the predication of women's security on "setting up mechanisms of women's sensitisation, their access to knowledge, and building of their capacities" (TAP 2010). A report published by TAP in November 2010 also revealed that a similar national conference on women's economic security, focused upon Tunisian women's access to microcredits, was hosted by UNFT at the time, in order "to further reinforce women's presence in the economic system" (Ibid). During this national conference, UNFT "expressed best wishes to President Zine El Abidine ben Ali and First Lady Leila Ben Ali…they expressed as well satisfaction at the honourable ratings of Tunisia by international specialized authorities…reiterating support to President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali as leader of the country's progress and invulnerability" (Ibid). Such rhetoric highlights the extent to which UNFT was imbricated in the state's knowledge production practices on women, "producing common objects that consolidate the group…and engaging them collectively in a process of transformation" (Akrich 2010:7). Here, UNFT not only reproduced the authoritarian narrative but actively performed what Demortain (2017) terms the "politics of expertise" — converting social-scientific and programmatic knowledge into legitimising discourse.

Such efforts enabled UNFT to capture the majority of external funding allocated to Tunisian CSOs active in the gender field, with organisations such as USAID regarding "UNFT as the most important player among the women's organisations"

(Brand 1998:46) and becoming “UNFT’s most important funder” (Ibid). UNFT’s diplomatic efforts to promote women’s security would thus simultaneously promote “the conditions of trust and confidence required within international affairs” (Kallander 2021:63-64). Well-versed in international contexts, UNFT women embodied the ultimate ‘la Femme Tunisienne’, representing “the success of state feminism and the modernity of the nation” (Ibid), as central parts of Ben Ali’s upgraded authoritarianism formula for legitimacy and entrenchment of his one-man rule.

3.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has demonstrated that UNFT is best understood through a dual-layer lens: simultaneously a state-proximate CSO and yet also an epistemic community, whose recognised expertise saw it participate in an epistemic CoP with the Benalist state. This enabled me to highlight the less obvious, yet equally pervasive, ways in which Ben Ali expanded his authoritarian reach. By integrating and advancing both epistemic communities and CoPs literatures, this chapter provided a richer, theoretically-informed analysis of how subtle, knowledge-based mechanisms reinforced authoritarian control in Tunisia.

Central to this analysis was the previously under-explored role of UNFT, which this chapter reframed from an ineffectual, government-aligned organisation, to a pivotal epistemic actor within an epistemic CoP alongside the Benalist state, drawing upon the theoretical framework laid down in Chapter 1 to bring to light the multi-level power dynamics surrounding state feminism. As a result, linking the workings of power-knowledge and hegemonic truth regimes engendered by the Benalist state to UNFT’s experiences and policies, it was revealed how Ben Ali could utilise a policy area such as women’s security policy to ‘upgrade’ his authoritarianism, and the central role played by UNFT, as an epistemic community, in this endeavour. The detailed historical media articles analysis demonstrated how UNFT’s extensive activities – from educational initiatives to international diplomatic engagements – operated firmly within the ideological parameters delineated by the Benalist regime. These practices were consistently sustained by shared communal routines and

discourses, thereby reinforcing the regime's idealised construction of Tunisian femininity ('la Femme') as central to its vision of modernity and societal control.

Notwithstanding these sophisticated strategies and the broader framework of authoritarian upgrading deployed by Ben Ali – including state feminism – his regime evidently ultimately failed to secure enduring legitimacy. Beyond the dramatic collapse of his authoritarian system in 2011, the regime's extensive efforts to portray itself as progressive through the discourse and practice of state feminism also did not dispel characterisations recognising the Benalist state "as deeply and structurally patriarchal, rather than an emancipatory apparatus more feminist than the people" (Yacoubi 2016:254). Consequently, the chapter concludes that the instrumentalisation of women's security policy, as sophisticated and multi-layered as it was, could not ultimately insulate Ben Ali's regime from popular discontent and collapse, nor permanently transform perceptions of his rule as inherently authoritarian and patriarchal.

Chapter 4: ATFD, AFTURD, and Women's Physical and Economic Security under Ben Ali

4.1 Introduction

Despite Tunisia's undemocratic state formation, independent women's organisations operated under Ben Ali. Many of their members had been active in, or inspired by, the feminist movements of the 1930s–1950s (Labidi 2007). Chief amongst these were ATFD and its research-oriented partner AFTURD, which together formed the movement's core and articulated its shared objectives and causal beliefs (Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh 2014:24). Unlike UNFT, they emerged from a shared political vision amongst educated elite women, uniting "activists, academics, and experts (sociologists, historians, lawyers, doctors, journalists, and students)" (Ibid:25). As outlined in this thesis' Introduction, I refer to ATFD, AFTURD, and other independent women's organisations as "feminist", following their self-identification and its widespread usage in Tunisian political and social discourse. This is a pragmatic

rather than theoretical usage: I do not engage feminist IR theory but employ the term for analytical clarity, mindful of its contestation and evolving meaning.

“Feminist” in this chapter, and throughout Part B, is thus understood in a broad, practice-oriented sense: actors and organisations whose activities challenge genderbased discrimination and promote equality in law, policy, and society. This aligns with Karen Offen’s influential formulation of feminism as dismantling patriarchal ideologies and systems of control, re-evaluating power in social, economic, and political spheres, and seeking balance between women and men whilst recognising their differences and shared humanity (Odfeminina 2023:5150). Crucially, Offen stresses that feminism is not a monolithic Western ideology; movements must be analysed on their own historical and cultural terms, rather than through external theoretical categories (Offen 1988:130–132). This caution is especially pertinent in Tunisia, where ATFD and AFTURD articulated feminism through both universalist rights discourses and locally rooted struggles over law, religion, and women’s security.

Following the dual-layer reading developed for UNFT in Chapter 3, this chapter argues that ATFD and AFTURD should be seen both as CSOs and as epistemic communities. As CSOs, they also exhibited the defining traits of epistemic communities: networks of professionals with recognised expertise and authoritative claims to policy-relevant knowledge (Haas 1992:3). Although existing studies have largely and accurately situated ATFD and AFTURD as CSOs with limited agency under Ben Ali, neglecting this epistemic layer obscures the interplay between knowledge production, activism, and authoritarian rule. Additionally, through their overlapping practices in the domain of women’s security – both nationally and internationally – they constituted “a configuration of a domain of knowledge that constitutes like-mindedness, a community of people that ‘creates the social fabric of learning’, and a shared practice that embodies ‘the knowledge the community develops, shares, and maintains’” (Wenger et al. 2002:28–29), consistent with Lave and Wenger’s definition of CoPs.

This chapter thus analyses ATFD and AFTURD as “the community of practice’s active participants” (Adler and Faubert 2022:51) in women’s security. It advances a novel contribution by examining them as epistemic communities within an authoritarian context, extending the epistemic communities and CoPs frameworks to reveal their more complex role as producers and transmitters of authoritative feminist knowledge, shaping both policy and public discourse on women’s security. Drawing on the domains of women’s security most prominent in policy documents, publications, and secondary literature under Ben Ali, the chapter focuses on two areas: GBV and equal inheritance. It argues that ATFD and AFTURD strategically performed core epistemic functions – agenda-setting, authoritative knowledge production, norm-setting, and policy advocacy (see Appendix Table A5). This constitutes the first study conducting a comparative scholarly analysis of ATFD and AFTURD’s activities, tracing their trajectories as distinct epistemic communities, whilst also highlighting key moments of collaboration as an epistemic CoP, as defined in Chapter 1.

This chapter also contributes by analysing how these feminist epistemic communities navigated authoritarian structures, contested state feminism, and cultivated transnational feminist knowledge networks – areas under-theorised in scholarship on Tunisian feminist movements and Benalist authoritarian resilience. It advances the literature by challenging reductive portrayals of feminist activism under authoritarianism, instead framing ATFD and AFTURD as influential sites of knowledge production and policy engagement, operating within and against authoritarian power structures. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, existing analyses of Benalist authoritarianism often collapse non-state-aligned actors into the undifferentiated category of “civil society,” dismissing them as ineffectual (see Wolf 2023). Such assessments obscure the possibility that democratic deliberation and epistemic influence can persist even under repression.

That said, this chapter remains attentive to the constraints ATFD and AFTURD faced under authoritarianism. As embedded actors, their practices and institutionalisation were shaped by top-level political dynamics. Rather than adopting an idealised view of epistemic communities or CoPs, it takes a strategic perspective that recognises

their agency in mitigating oppressive power structures. The aim is not to romanticise their role, but to critically assess how actors practise resistance and adaptation within authoritarian contexts (Smith 2013:94). This aligns with calls to refine the epistemic communities framework by situating it within specific political contexts and prevailing power interests (Cross 2012:146). It also reflects Cross' important insight that, "when policy change is highly controversial, even some level of epistemic community influence is significant" (Ibid:148).

The lens of authoritarian upgrading, introduced in Chapter 2, remains useful here. Although Ben Ali legalised ATFD and AFTURD in 1989 during the August parliamentary elections – primarily to "'sell' abroad" an image of pluralism (Bessis 1999: para.12) – he soon made clear, in a 1992 Women's Day speech, that women were expected to align with regime plans, uphold civic and religious values, and remain within state-defined boundaries for emancipation (Ibid: para.10). In contrast, ATFD and AFTURD pursued sensitive issues such as GBV, sexual liberation, inheritance, and women's political leadership (Yacoubi 2016). Whilst the regime sought to constrain their activism, it also co-opted their visibility and expertise to present Tunisia as progressive and aligned with global rights norms. Highlighting the constraints they faced further supports the argument advanced in Chapter 2: that under Ben Ali, women's security policy functioned as an authoritarian state-building tool, not a genuine emancipatory project. However, far from passive instruments of state power, ATFD and AFTURD strategically negotiated their constrained environment, exercising meaningful, if bounded, agency that deserves greater scholarly attention.

This chapter adopts a qualitative methodological approach, combining analysis of web-based newspaper articles and reports published by ATFD, AFTURD, international organisations, and research centres, with three in-depth interviews with ATFD activists and an email correspondence with an AFTURD member. Triangulating interviews with policy documents, archival records, and secondary literature strengthens the analysis and ensures credibility.

Following the structure of the previous chapter, I first outline the historical development of ATFD and AFTURD to contextualise their qualification as epistemic communities. I then analyse their domestic activities on women's security, showing how each also formed part of broader epistemic CoPs – "domains of knowledge that constitute communities of engaging practitioners bound by an interest in learning and performing shared practices" (Adler et al. 2024:2) – including collaborations with regional and international organisations.

4.2 ATFD and AFTURD's History

The emergence of Tunisia's two foremost women's organisations – ATFD and AFTURD, hailed as "one of the first models for women's emancipation in the MENA" (Daniele 2014:2) – was rooted in two intellectual currents. First was the postcolonial state's promotion of girls' education after 1956, which produced a modern elite committed to advancing alternative visions to those of dominant state powers (Labidi 2007:9). Second was inspiration from Tahar Haddad, the leftist jurist often dubbed "the father of Tunisian feminist thought" (Hernandez-Justo 2021:25). His 1930 treatise *Our Women in Shari'a and in Society* called for equal inheritance, the abolition of polygyny, and expanded female education. These ideas shaped the late1980s 'Club Tahar Haddad,' founded by women from the national bourgeoisie as a hub for debate on the 'woman question,' from legal rights to labour contributions (Daniele 2014:19). The Club also launched *Nissa'*, a feminist magazine that published eight issues between 1985 and 1987 before state closure. In 1989, the Club was formally reconstituted into two organisations: ATFD, founded in 1982, and AFTURD, founded in 1986, both fully institutionalised only after the Bourguiba era (Daniele 2014; Labidi 2007). Whilst working closely, they retained distinct identities, with ATFD pursuing an activist agenda and AFTURD adopting a more researchoriented approach (Daniele 2014:19).

ATFD members consistently self-identified as feminists pursuing an activist agenda independent of hegemonic discourse. Their objectives included "eliminating discrimination against women, defending existing rights, developing Tunisian legislation for greater real equality between the sexes… [and] changing patriarchal

and discriminatory attitudes" (Brand 1998:80). They framed this as "part of a larger battle against all forms of discrimination, and part of the struggle for true democracy" (Ibid). As Khadija Cherif, sociologist and ATFD President (2006–2008), noted, "ATFD has been involved in the struggle for equality in inheritance, the elimination of GBV, and sexual and reproductive rights" (Cherif 2017). Echoing this, Tunisian activist Souha Ben Othman highlighted the organisation's feminist approach to women's security:

> "I am a feminist and I cannot deny it in my everyday political activism. I cannot take out my feminist identity since it is part of me. For me 'feminism' means… women should have the same rights as well as the same obligations [as men], without any kind of discriminations. Feminism means protecting women regardless of their social background, political identity, position" (Ben Othman 2013, in Daniele 2014:5).

AFTURD likewise identified as a feminist research organisation, centring its work on scholarship and analysis. Its objectives included studying strategies to integrate women into socio-economic development (Brand 1998:27) and assessing women's conditions more broadly (Ben Salem 2010:6). In line with ATFD's priorities, it also commissioned research on GBV and inheritance equality (Ibid:13), often tailoring outputs for legal practitioners and activists (CMI Report R 2016:5). Its membership comprised professionals from journalism, academia, engineering, medicine, and law—fields regarded as "privileged research activities" that secured representation on ministerial committees into the 1990s (Labidi 2007:17). This reflected the state's reliance on feminist expertise even as organisations challenged "the highly masculine interpretation of state feminism" (Debuysere 2016:225). As the chapter will show, both AFTURD and ATFD sought to influence women's security – particularly physical safety and inheritance equality – through politically oppositional mobilisation.

4.2.1 ATFD and AFTURD as epistemic communities

As outlined above, ATFD and AFTURD comprised feminist activists who collectively met the criteria of epistemic communities: “sharing a set of causal beliefs, canons of validity, principles, and a common policy project” (Peterson 1992:148). They can be conceptualised through Antoniades’ purpose-oriented approach, which defines epistemic communities as “socially recognised knowledge-based networks” whose members share a worldview and seek to embed it in public discourse and practice, locally or transnationally (2003:26). This framework is especially useful as it preserves Haas’ core elements, whilst situating epistemic authority in its social and historical context. It also grounds Haas’ claim that such communities are united by “shared causal beliefs and cause-and-effect understandings” (1992:18), and his later clarification that they are not limited to scientists but bound by “shared belief in the verity and applicability of particular forms of knowledge” (2009:3).

Haas’ point was exemplified by one of my interviewees, Monia Ben Jemia, former ATFD President (2016 – 2018), and current EuroMed Rights President (Kapitalis 2024). Ben Jemia was exceptionally well-qualified to provide insights into ATFD under Ben Ali, having joined the organisation at its inception in 1989, thus witnessing its development and trajectory. Further, as a Law Professor at the University of Carthage, she has extensively researched and published on women’s rights, family law, and GBV, making her incredibly knowledgeable about the intellectual foundations underpinning ATFD’s activism. Ben Jemia emphasised ATFD’s professional diversity – academics, doctors, journalists, lawyers, and engineers – but stressed members were united by their shared commitment to the applicability of feminist knowledge as a means of achieving social justice and equality. In her words, *“what united us was not our professions, but our feminist consciousness and our shared conviction in feminist knowledge as truth”* (Interview, 28 October 2024). Her account confirms that epistemic communities are bound less by discipline than by a shared belief in the applicability of specific knowledge.

ATFD members were equally united in critiquing state feminism, viewing its legislative efforts as insufficient and contradictory (Bessis 1999). By the 1980s, it was clear to them that only women aligned with the regime’s paternalistic “*feminisme*

au masculin" were elevated (Debuysere 2016:213). This subordinated women's empowerment to preserving Tunisia's modernist identity (Tunisianité), embodied in the professional, modern, and moderate 'la Femme' (Brand 1998; Yacoubi 2016). Ben Jemia recalled: *"sometime during the first decade of Benalism, it became very obvious to ATFD women that Ben Ali wasn't going to give us feminism…his 'feminism'* was a *façade of progress…political theatre"* (Interview, 28 October 2024). In 1994, ATFD held a seminar on women and family denouncing the use of religion to justify patriarchal oppression, boldly accusing Ben Ali of "portraying his rule as liberating while actually stripping women of their freedom and dignity" (Bessis 1999:para.14). Such actions demonstrate ATFD's role as an epistemic community – a "network of specialists…who share a common world view and seek to translate their beliefs into public policies and programmes" (Stone 1996:36-37), performing core epistemic functions of agenda-setting, knowledge production, and normative critique. As the CoPs literature also reminds us: "activities, tasks, functions, and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning…these systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities" (Lave and Wenger 1991:53).

Similarly, AFTURD functioned as an epistemic community, distinguished by its scholarly orientation and production of authoritative feminist research that challenged state narratives on gender and development. Its members – primarily academics and researchers – prioritised evidence-based advocacy, positioning AFTURD as a key source of feminist policy insight. As a former AFTURD member who joined in the early 1990s revealed through email correspondence, AFTURD's members, predominantly academics and researchers, consistently prioritised *"producing credible, reliable, and academically sound feminist knowledge"* (Anonymous, personal communication, 14 January 2025), deliberately contrasted with statesponsored discourses. Preferring to remain anonymous, she highlighted the regular seminars, research publications, and conferences aimed explicitly at influencing public policy debates and challenging established perceptions (Ibid). In her words, *"our influence came directly from our scholarship. We knew our strength was our research, and this was how we hoped to influence change"* (Ibid). This

commitment to credible, policy-relevant feminist knowledge illustrates AFTURD's epistemic community functions – generating expertise, setting policy agendas, and shaping social practices through feminist knowledge dissemination.

Since their founding in 1989, ATFD and AFTURD also cultivated ties with national organisations such as the Tunisian League for Human Rights (LTDH) and the UGTT trade union, whilst also forging transnational linkages (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016:638). Through these alliances, they co-constructed practices centred on women's security, advancing cross-border feminist knowledge networks (Faleg 2012). This aligns with Antoniades' conception of epistemic communities as agendasetting actors whose strategies involve "informing and mobilising as many people, groups, and organisations as possible…and…attaining a transnational character" (Antoniades 2003:33).

It is important, however, to first acknowledge alternative characterisations of ATFD and AFTURD under authoritarianism. Whilst limited scholarly work has explored their role during this period, some authors depict these organisations as constrained civil society actors with limited autonomy or impact (see Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016; Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh 2014), whilst others view them as primarily symbolic bodies that legitimised Ben Ali's state feminism without challenging authoritarianism (see Brand 1998). Additional scholarship subsumes them within a civil society considered an instrument serving the regime's oversight and legitimacy (Wolf 2023; Hibou 2011). These characterisations are not without basis – Ben Ali indeed placed clear limits on their influence – yet they fail to capture the fuller picture. My argument is that the epistemic functions of these CSOs have been overlooked. Through feminist expertise, transnational networks, and interventions in women's security debates, they exercised authority, activism, and knowledge-production that exceeded symbolic presence. This was evident through their efforts within numerous women's security domains in Tunisia, including GBV.

4.3 GBV in Tunisia

GBV – encompassing domestic violence, rape, and harassment – has long been recognised as a serious problem in Tunisia. Since the 1980s, feminist activists attributed its persistence to discriminatory laws and entrenched gender hierarchies (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016:640). A 2010 national survey by the Office Nationale de la Famille et de la Population (ONFP), released only after the 2011 uprising, found that 47.6% of women aged 18–64 had experienced physical, psychological, sexual, or economic violence, and 53.5% had encountered such violence in public spaces such as transport, education, leisure, and work (ATFD 2017). Although domestic assault was criminalised under Bourguiba, enforcement remained rare, prompting women's organisations to frame freedom from violence as central to equal citizenship and human dignity (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016:640). These local struggles resonated with global second-wave feminism, which highlighted domestic violence, reproductive rights, and workplace inequality (Holmes 2000), and drew on feminist theory linking GBV to structural gendered power asymmetries (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016:638). The 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women further defined GBV as a manifestation of male dominance (UNGA Res. 48/104, para. 6), echoing CEDAW's mandate to dismantle discriminatory laws (UN Women 1979). GBV thus emerged as both a national and global concern, underpinned by patriarchal structures and legal inequality.

4.3.1 ATFD Shaping the Agenda and Producing Authoritative Knowledge on GBV within Tunisia

Amidst rising local and global attention to GBV, ATFD launched its first domestic violence and sexual harassment campaign in 1991 under the slogan "Violence is Vengeance and Silence is Harm" (ATFD 2017:9). It was triggered by the attempted state cover-up of a gang rape of a 12-year-old girl, later disowned by her father (Ibid). ATFD's campaign was censored for six months, with authorities insisting that "it is not the responsibility of the Association [i.e. ATFD] to deal with violence, but for the police to ensure the safety of citizens" (Ibid). Nevertheless, ATFD resumed with a second poster campaign in December 1991 across five cities, which, in ATFD's own words, "shook up consciences and broke taboos" (Ibid:10). Media attention followed, and ATFD representatives were invited to discuss it on air, prompting the regime to announce reforms to contain public outrage (Ibid).

These included Ben Ali's 1993 revisions to an existing law on spousal violence, transforming it into "an aggravating circumstance leading to a higher punishment" (Voorhoeve 2021:382). However, parliamentary debates framed the change as reinforcing "the marital bond…excluding the causes of discord…and allowing for betterment between [the spouses] for the sake of the family and society" (Ibid). This revealed the government's paramount concern with protecting traditional values, a point also exemplified by the conditions concerning the law's prosecution – "the police could only act on the wife's complaint… women who felt pressurised to drop their charges, were not protected by the state" (Ibid). Manifestly, whilst ATFD's activism influenced state response, it also revealed the regime's prioritisation of patriarchal social stability over women's substantive security.

As discerned by M.J. Peterson in her study highlighting cetologists as a specific epistemic community, it may be the case that epistemic communities may not whollydetermine outcomes but rather shape debates so that only certain responses appear reasonable (1992:148). Similarly, ATFD bounded the range of feasible state policies, limiting Ben Ali's freedom to ignore GBV entirely. In Peterson's terms, "a static analysis of each separate choice reveals an epistemic community having only secondary influence; a dynamic analysis of trends reveals an epistemic community constantly affecting policy by bounding the range of its fluctuation" (Ibid). ATFD's role thus exemplifies agenda-setting: not imposing policies directly but defining the scope of legitimate responses.

Frustrated by the state's limited response, ATFD established Tunisia's first counselling and support centre for GBV survivors on International Women's Day 1993 – *'Centre d'Ecoute et d'Orientation des Femmes Victimes de Violence de l'ATFD'* (Listening and Orientation Centre for Women Victims of Violence; CEOFVV) (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016:642). Partly funded by the Canadian development agency, with staff trained using small contributions from Italian, German, and American aid groups (Brand 1998:81), CEOFVV was run by volunteer ATFD activists, which ATFD claimed lent CEOFVV "its militant character and instilled closer proximity and trust with the victims" (ATFD 2017:11). ATFD publications described

CEOFVV as an “incubator of a feminism in action against violence against women” (ATFD 2017:9), offering victims supportive listening, legal and/or social support, and psychological support. This constituted bottom-up knowledge production grounded in experiential expertise, positioning ATFD as a learning collective generating embodied, situated knowledge through practice.

Between 1990 and mid-2000, CEOFVV recorded 789 legal cases, mainly domestic violence, followed by workplace harassment and abuse (Grami 2008:358). Yet securing justice proved difficult: ATFD documented judicial resistance, biased enforcement, and inadequate investigations (Ibid). By 2010, the centre’s hotline was receiving 5–10 new cases weekly, including 102 involving minors, 30% of which were sexual (ATFD 2010:13). However, ATFD indicated in 2010 that CEOFVV’s hotline remained little known due to state repression, with media campaigns “rarely mentioning the name and hotline number of the centre” (Ibid:12). This demonstrates how examining the practices of epistemic communities can enhance our comprehension of the politics of security creation, in addition to making evident the technologies of power which are promoted to control human actions in authoritarian states.

One of CEOFVV’s most significant pedagogical initiatives was its international seminar, *“Violence Against Women: The Unveiling of Sexist Violence Within Tunisian Society”*, held on 11–13 November 1993 (ATFD 2017:11). Drawing on fieldwork from the emergency ward of Tunis’ Rabta hospital, it exposed the link between patriarchal discrimination and domestic violence, directly challenging the Ben Ali regime’s denial of such a connection (Ibid). The regime swiftly banned the seminar proceedings from publication, lifting censorship only in 2008 – illustrating its desire to control the narrative around modernity, gender equality, and women’s place in society (Grami 2008:360). Ben Ali’s authoritarian model left little room for dissent: feminist activists who crossed into ‘political’ territory risked surveillance and harassment by the regime’s political police (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016:641). As the BBC reported in 2008, “ATFD is constantly harassed in a country where the regime highlights the status of women…daily life has become hell” (BBC Middle East 2008). Yet, despite

this repression, the seminar marked a vital epistemic intervention by ATFD – a deliberate attempt to shift perceptions of domestic violence from a private failing to a systemic form of oppression.

Another domain where the "repression of all dissident opinions" was evident (ATFD 2017:14) was ATFD's advocacy around sexual harassment. In 2000, it launched the campaign *"The Right to Work Undermined by Sexual Harassment"* (Ibid:13), exemplifying how "epistemic communities help set the political agenda by clarifying the importance of the problem and the consequences of not acting…their causal knowledge…contributes to policy formulation as well as innovation" (Clunan n.d.: para.4). On International Women's Day 2004, ATFD activists submitted a legislative proposal to parliament calling for legal measures to help women "break their silence" and amend labour laws to penalise discrimination, including harassment (Agence France Presse 2004). An ATFD report later revealed that this effort contributed to the criminalisation of sexual harassment in Tunisia's Penal Code that same year via Article 226 (Law n°2004-73) (ATFD 2017:13).

However, by 2010, ATFD expressed that "although we welcome this Article, its provisions fall below the expectations of women victims" (ATFD 2010:15). The article was inserted in the section on "public decency", framing sexual harassment as a moral offence rather than a power-based violation (ATFD 2010:15). It defined harassment as "persistent behaviour…that undermines a person's dignity or modesty…to subject that person to sexual desires" (Ibid), with no reference to power, coercion, or workplace abuse. ATFD criticised this framing, noting its absence from labour or civil service codes and calling for a redefinition emphasising abuse of authority. This highlights how epistemic communities help expose "the implicit and explicit assumptions and power relations that are embedded within discourses on peace, security, and development" (Smith 2013:97). It also points to the organisation's deeper epistemic functions – producing authoritative knowledge challenging dominant legal framings, whilst offering alternative conceptualisations rooted in lived experiences and social critique.

In 2007, under pressure to appear responsive on 'the women question' and to contain the growing independent feminist movement, the regime launched the national strategy *"For the Prevention of Violence Within the Family and Society: GBV Throughout the Life Cycle"* (ATFD 2010:13). Whilst this development reflects the success of epistemic communities in "first framing an issue so that policy makers understand that it is a problem" (Clunan n.d.: para.4), it is also important to contextualise it within an authoritarian logic, where Ben Ali's main 'problem' was how to stay in power. In any case, the strategy, developed from ONFP's 2006 programme *"Gender Equality and Prevention of GBV"*, focused on four areas: data production, service provision, awareness-raising, and legal advocacy (ATFD 2010:13). ATFD reported it "had made a major contribution" to the initiative, with its 2017 publication noting that its activists "with strong feminist expertise acquired during all these years of struggle" (ATFD 2017:13), were invited to participate. This confirms ATFD's epistemic role, particularly as the state relied on its expertise to address complex social problems – "uncertainty about how to respond to these problems generates demand for informed advice about the causes and interrelationships of particular social or physical processes" (Clunan n.d.: para.4). Yet ATFD's 2010 statement was critical:

> "The strategy has encountered some difficulties because official statements are rather unclear, and it is taking a long time to get it fully operational. From a legal viewpoint, the strategy does not provide for the adoption of a general law on GBV, as it considers that existing laws are adequate. Therefore, gaps…remain, based on legal protection, the prevention and eradication of GBV, and communication, awareness-raising, and diagnosis of the problem of GBV" (ATFD 2010:13).

Consequently, CEOFVV extended its work beyond service provision, grounding its mission in "a founding principle of the feminist approach: effective solidarity with women who are victims of violence" (ATFD 2017:16). ATFD aimed to deepen feminist thought and disseminate critical discourse on patriarchy, sexual domination, economic and cultural violence, and the public/private divide (Ibid:11) – in clear

contrast to the state's celebratory narrative of '*la Femme Tunisienne'*. This is substantiated by media reporting from the time, affirming that epistemic communities "act as learning environments in their own right" (Amin and Cohendet 2004:66). For example, a 2010 *BinaaNews* article revealed how, on 25 November 2010, during national commemorations for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, ATFD organised a national conference on GBV (BinaaNews 2010). Drawing on CEOFVV data, ATFD's then-President Hédia Jerad revealed that in 2010 alone, over 1,500 women had sought CEOFVV's support (Ibid), highlighting both the prevalence of GBV and the centrality of grassroots structures in offering survivors care and justice. The article revealed how Jerad broadened the definition of GBV to include symbolic coercion, citing a woman forced to wear the hijab at home by her husband due to his brothers' presence and arguing that in such instances, the veil functioned as a disciplinary mechanism – and therefore a form of GBV (Ibid). Fellow ATFD sociologist Dorra Mahfoudh echoed these concerns by emphasising the pervasive silence surrounding GBV, especially within the realm of economic violence. Dorra – one of my interviewees –[8] is one of Taher Haddad Club's founders, who served as a professor at Tunis University before retiring in 2016. This conference thus reinforced ATFD's epistemological position that violence must be conceptualised in its full social and symbolic complexity, encompassing physical, psychological, economic, and cultural dimensions. It also highlighted the enduring role of ATFD in foregrounding GBV as a systemic, intersectional phenomenon requiring legislative transformation, cultural critique, and grassroots mobilisation. In this sense, the 2010 conference reaffirmed ATFD's role as a producer of authoritative feminist knowledge aiming to inform public debate, shape legal frameworks, and unsettle normative gender hierarchies.

Indeed, ATFD's work attracted admiration beyond Tunisia. On International Women's Day 2011 – weeks after Ben Ali's ousting – the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) issued a message of solidarity with ATFD and its thenPresident, lawyer Sana Ben Achour (Tunisnews 2011). IFEX praised Ben

[8] 8 I refer to Dorra Mahfoudh as 'Dorra', since I refer to her daughter Amel Mahfoudh as 'Mahfoudh' throughout this thesis.

Achour's courage under authoritarian repression, highlighting ATFD's monitoring of state media and activism on GBV. One delegate, recalling a December 2010 visit to Tunisia, was "astonished by the dynamism of ATFD and the absolute courage and perseverance in publicly denouncing violence against women" (Ibid).

IFEX's recognition underscored the performative disjuncture between the regime's international image as a guardian of '*la Femme Tunisienne'*, and the actual violence and surveillance ATFD endured. ATFD's activism thus became both a local response to women's lived insecurity, and part of a broader contestation over political meaning, legitimacy, and authority. That IFEX, along with twenty partner organisations, chose to mark International Women's Day by publicly honouring ATFD and explicitly praising its attempts to tackle GBV under Ben Ali (Ibid), exemplifies how ATFD's knowledge-based practices had become transnationally legible and normatively influential. Such moments of global recognition amplified ATFD's role as a feminist epistemic community, operating through pedagogy, advocacy, and mobilisation, to challenge and reconfigure dominant discourses on women, security, and citizenship in Tunisia.

4.3.2 ATFD Shaping the Agenda and Producing Authoritative Knowledge on GBV Regionally and Internationally

Given the restrictions placed on its activities domestically, it is unsurprising that ATFD sought influence through Arab, Maghrebi, and international bodies. As the organisation explained, "taking advantage of these forums and new spaces for solidarity and militancy…ATFD disseminates its messages, makes its work known, raises awareness of rights and freedoms, creates bridges and links of solidarity, and engages in common actions whose impact was decisive in the course of the feminist struggle" against GBV (ATFD 2017:12). Much like Peterson's epistemic community of cetologists, who "found themselves compelled to explore more transnational strategies because their traditional focus on national ones quickly proved insufficient" (Peterson 1992:171), ATFD's regional and international outreach constituted a deliberate agenda-setting manoeuvre.

Regionally, ATFD "focused mainly…around the issue of gender equality and violence" (ATFD 2017:14), collaborating with Maghrebi associations, including '*SOS Femmes en Détresse d'Algérie'* (Algeria) and *'Centre d'Ecoute de Casablanca'* (Morocco). It was also a key participant in *'Le Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité'* (CME95), a research-oriented transnational feminist coalition uniting organisations from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Through CME-95, ATFD contributed to major publications, exemplifying a transnational epistemic CoP – "like-minded practitioners who are informally as well as contextually bound by a shared interest in learning and applying a common practice" (Bicchi 2022:25). These publications included: *Maghrebians: Changes and Gravity* (1995); *White Paper on Reservations* (1995); *100 Measures for Egalitarian Codification* (1995); *Flagrant Violations and Violence against Women* (1995); *Maghrebi Women Between Physical and Symbolic Violence* (1999); *Self-Portrait of a Movement* (2003); and *Equality in the Family in the Maghreb* (2003) (ATFD 2017:15).

These works positioned ATFD not only as contributor, but also as architect of regional feminist epistemologies. During our interview, Khedija Arfaoui – a prominent feminist, peace activist, and long-standing ATFD member briefly jailed under Ben Ali for criticising the president online – recounted how regional fora enabled epistemic resistance: *"We met in Rabat, in Algiers, even in Beirut, to exchange ideas and produce what was not always possible in Tunis"* (Interview, 04 November 2024). She specifically highlighted ATFD's central role in CME-95's 1999 GBV publication, noting that *"the Tunisian section came from ATFD's own field notes, especially from the Centre d'Écoute"* (Ibid), underscoring ATFD's function as knowledge-gathering institution and norm-setting actor. ATFD also became an active member of the Arab Women's Forum AÎSHA (founded on the sidelines of the 1993 Vienna Conference); the SALMA Arab Network against GBV (created in 2006 by feminist organisations from across the MENA); and the Coalition for Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies (founded in 2002 as a solidarity network of 400 organisations from eleven MENA countries). Within the latter, ATFD led the 2009 *Un Jour Un Combat* campaign, disseminating daily testimonies and statistics on GBV (Ibid). Ben Jemia recalled the *"frightening level of surveillance"* (Interview, 28 October 2024)

surrounding the 2009 campaign, noting however that it circulated widely via feminist regional networks and became a powerful transnational awareness-raising tool. Although, as she revealed, *"we were hesitant to screen it in Tunisia…it was shared through digital newsletters, CD-ROMs, and international symposia"* (Ibid), exemplifying epistemic resistance in action. Through these efforts, ATFD exemplified the strategic use of transnational feminist infrastructures to exercise epistemic agency and advocate policy change, without triggering direct repression.

In 1995, in partnership with EL TALLER, an international NGO based in Tunisia, ATFD championed the creation of an Arab court against GBV, a transnational initiative rejected by Ben Ali's regime but realised in Lebanon, where sessions were held in Beirut on 28–30 June 1995. The court ended its lifespan by issuing two referential declarations, the '*Bayan al haq'* (Declaration of Rights) and the '*Bayan al âdl'* (Declaration of Justice) (ATFD 2017:12). According to Dorra, ATFD envisioned the court as a platform through which legal scholars could record precedents, testimonies, and analyses that national courts systematically silenced (Interview, 17 August 2024). She explained that although Tunisia rejected the court outright, the documentation produced was discreetly circulated amongst reform-minded judges and lawyers. In her words during our interview conducted in Arabic, *"it planted a seed which bloomed only after 2011"* (Ibid, translation mine). This signifies how epistemic communities, such as ATFD, "are at the forefront of recognised trends towards transnational governance" (Cross 2013:138), as well as encapsulates ATFD's norm-setting ambitions through legal innovation.

ATFD also engaged with the UN's various bodies, conferences, and mechanisms, bolstering its credibility as a transnational actor. In 1993, it participated in the Vienna Conference on Human Rights, where for the first time GBV was explicitly recognised as a violation of universal human rights (ATFD 2017:12). It was also present at the UN's 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (Ibid). Arfaoui remembered these moments with mixed pride and frustration – *"At the UN, we could finally speak. But at home, our posters were torn down. Our hotlines were blocked. The irony was sometimes unbearable"* (Interview, 04 November 2024).

In 1998, ATFD organised its own international forum, "*The Private is Public, the Public is Political"*, to catalyse global reflection on GBV (ATFD 2017:12). This initiative contributed to ATFD being granted consultative status at ECOSOC, the UN's Economic and Social Council, which subsequently supported a joint capacitybuilding project between ATFD, SOS Femmes en Détresse d'Algérie, and the Centre d'Ecoute de Casablanca (ATFD 2017:12). Focused on survivor reception and communication, this collaboration culminated in the publication *Algiers, Casa, Tunis: Women United Against Violence* (Ibid). Arfaoui described the forum as *"a pedagogical milestone…we brought the testimonies of Tunisian women to the international stage, anonymised, but real. This was our counter-archive to state denial"* (Interview, 04 November 2024). The publication also consolidated shared training protocols and advocacy tools, cementing ATFD's reputation as a producer of feminist knowledge with cross-contextual application.

Such practices help clarify how "epistemic communities not only seek to persuade states, but also a wide variety of *non-state* actors…they are not only underpinning specific government policies, but also shaping *governance* more broadly" (Cross 2013:139). Through these engagements, ATFD strategically leveraged transnational feminist infrastructures to bypass authoritarian constraints and assert its identity as an epistemic community grounded in praxis. Its members – lawyers, academics, sociologists, and activists – not only theorised, but co-produced actionable feminist knowledge across legal, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. As revealed through interviews, ATFD helped shape the contours of what was thinkable and legitimate in global and regional feminist policymaking. The chapter now turns to AFTURD's complementary efforts, underscoring the breadth and strategic pluralism of Tunisia's feminist epistemic communities.

4.3.3 AFTURD Shaping the Agenda and Producing Authoritative Knowledge on GBV Regionally and Internationally

AFTURD has been described as "a referent key actor in the fight of violence against women in Tunisia" (ENI CBCMED, n.d.). As a feminist association grounded in activist research, AFTURD pursued six core objectives: (I) researching women's

integration in development; (II) promoting critical participation of women in decisionmaking; (III) designing and evaluating women-centred development projects; (IV) fostering feminist scholarship to safeguard rights; (V) assessing the gendered impacts of development policies; and (VI) building communication networks among Tunisian, African, and Euro-Mediterranean women and relevant stakeholders (EuroMediterranean Women's Foundation 2016).

These objectives reflected AFTURD's foundational commitment to normative transformation, using knowledge production to critique and reframe institutional, legal, and cultural understandings of GBV. It frequently collaborated with CREDIF (introduced in Chapter 3) and CAWTAR (the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research, hosted by Tunisia) on research and advocacy reports addressing women's legal and social status (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016:641–642). It also produced its own studies, such as the 2001 report *Divorce, Violence, et Droits des Femmes*, which revealed that, despite Tunisia's progressive family laws, only 23% of divorced women with children were allowed to remain in the family home or were provided alternative housing by former husbands (CME-95 2003). This contravened legal obligations for fathers to provide housing for their children and custodial guardians (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network 2003). These empirical findings underscore AFTURD's authority as producer of critical feminist data, challenging official narratives and exposing GBV's structural dimensions through post-divorce housing insecurity.

Most significantly, AFTURD sponsored a widely impactful two-volume collective work in 1992, *Tunisiennes en devenir* (Tunisian Women in the Making) (Labidi 2007:17). Emerging from a writing workshop on the legal and political implications of humanist feminism, it enabled women victims and participants "to take stock of the feminist experience in Tunisia and to focus on how women lived when they were caught between the opposition and the powers that be" (Ibid). In their collective introduction, AFTURD described the work as a form of resistance, challenging a cultural tradition that silenced women by dismissing their testimony as "chatter" (Ibid). By centring lived experiences, the volumes helped reframe GBV from a private grievance to systemic oppression, contributing to AFTURD's norm-setting mission. Labidi goes so

far as to argue that, by choosing to shed light on GBV through an anthropological approach “that would deepen their understanding of their own subjectivity…these feminists [AFTURD] were in the process of constructing a universalist feminism for a new generation” (Ibid). Departing from earlier tactics like petitions and marches, AFTURD focused on unveiling cultural norms and advocating for protective mechanisms through intellectual and discursive shifts (Ibid:18). Rejecting the state’s top-down Tunisianité and its “emphasised femininity” (Debuysere 2016:226), AFTURD’s work challenged dominant gender narratives and redefined women’s security on feminist terms – treating GBV as systemic patriarchal control rather than merely a legal infraction.

On a regional/ international level, in 2007, AFTURD collaborated with CME-95, supported by the United Nations Development Fund for Women and UGTT, on “Degree of Adhesion to Egalitarian Values in the Tunisian Population” (Ben Salem 2010:25). This study constituted a landmark attempt at transnational norm internalisation, aligning domestic feminist knowledge with international rights frameworks, whilst shaping state and public discourse on equality. This was in line with the “attempt made for the epistemic community to attain a transnational character…a number of methods and practices are employed to achieve these targets: the organisation of conferences, seminars, press conferences, public discussions, lectures, publications, and so on” (Antoniades 2003:33). A pamphlet of findings was published in Tunis in March 2008 and disseminated nationwide (Ben Salem 2010:25), marking a dual effort at awareness-raising and policy advocacy, situating GBV within broader struggles over values, legitimacy, and postcolonial gender norms.

Further, between 2009–2010, AFTURD joined a Spanish-funded project on economic repercussions of violence against young women in Tunis (Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016:242). Concurrently, it conducted a study on precarious women and violence, highlighting how “women’s concentration in low-wage and precarious ‘feminized’ occupations such as textile or domestic workers, and especially domestic work carried out by teenage girls…could make women and girls vulnerable to

various forms of violence" (Ibid). These activities are reflective of the agenda-setting function of epistemic communities highlighted by Antoniades, worth quoting at length here, whereby epistemic communities, add "new issues to the agenda or change the way in which existing issues are approached and conceptualised…in both cases an alliance strategy is developed, where the members of a community try to inform and mobilise as many people, groups, and organisations as possible, thus increasing support for their ideas and the pressure on the political system to accept their approach" (Antoniades 2003:33). This 'alliance strategy' would come to determine the boundaries of an epistemic CoP in this area, "determined by people's knowledge and identity and by the discourse associated with a specific practice" (Adler and Faubert 2022:54). AFTURD's work, particularly its engagement with international donors and labour unions, exemplifies this alliance strategy, expanding the policy influence of feminist discourses on violence and embedding them in institutional planning, employment rights, and socio-economic reform discussions.

Thus, through intellectual scholarship and evidence-based advocacy, AFTURD complemented ATFD's activism, consolidating their shared role as epistemic communities within a CoP focused on women's security. By embedding feminist analysis within policy discourse, expanding the vocabulary around violence, and translating lived realities into policy-relevant data, AFTURD elevated marginalised experiences into authoritative policy knowledge – confirming its dual function as a norm entrepreneur and knowledge-broker. The subsequent section examines another critical arena of this epistemic CoP's policy advocacy: the highly contested issue of equal inheritance rights.

4.4 The Independent Feminist Organisations and Women's Right to Equal Inheritance

Inheritance, a central element within Muslim jurisprudence, has been a highly contested, charged, and tendentious issue in Tunisia since Independence. As Arfaoui explained, *"equal inheritance is the most delicate issue for it is against the Shari'a…how could this issue be tackled?"* (Interview, 04 November 2024). This is also why, despite the professedly progressive nature of Bourguiba's CSP, women

were “maintained in an unequal situation compared to that of men who remain family heads and inheritance right is largely dependent on the dispositions set by Islamic law” (Ibid). Indeed, with the highest religious authorities in Tunisia historically claiming inheritance as their exclusive domain, CSP title IX, ch.III on inheritance discusses “Quranic inheritance – wording lifted directly from the Quran” (CMI Report R 2016:5). This meant that “the CSP remained silent on equality in inheritance” (ATFD 2010:262), and granted women only half of the share inherited by men (Ibid:7). The CSP’s discriminatory inheritance provisions favouring men were as follows:

I. Pool of heir potentials: The kind of potential female heirs from amongst the deceased’s relatives were delimited to include only the mother, grandmother, daughter, grand-daughter, sister, and wife. Contrastingly, the kind of potential male heirs was unlimited, making it possible for the uncle, nephew, and cousins to inherit the deceased in certain contexts, whilst the aunt, niece, or female cousin were prohibited from doing so under the same circumstances;
II. The entitlement of distant male relatives to compete with the deceased’s female relatives for the inheritance: If the deceased did not leave behind any ascendants or descendants, then his only brother would be the sole heir, but under the same conditions the deceased’s only sister would be granted only half the inheritance, and more than one sister would have to share two thirds, with the remainder left for distant male relatives;
III. Male privilege: The stipulation of a double share for men related to the same degree to the deceased as a woman. (ATFD 2010:31).

The influence of this was such that, although it did ratify CEDAW in 1985, Tunisia also entered certain reservations to the Convention, including the following reservation concerning article 16, which discussed inheritance:

> “The Tunisian Government considers itself not bound by article 16, paragraphs (c), (d), and (f) of the Convention and declares that paragraphs

> (g) and (h) of that article must not conflict with the provisions of the Personal Status Code concerning the granting of family names to children and the acquisition of property through inheritance" (ATFD 2010:5).

Nonetheless, viewing women's rights to equal inheritance as a matter weighing heavily on their economic security, since their inception, ATFD and AFTURD endeavoured to, as per Arfaoui, *"examine the multiple forms of gender-based discrimination faced by women"* (Interview, 04 November 2024), including the issue of equal inheritance, thusly "organising press conferences, roundtables, seminars, workshops, and various other events" (Ibid) in a commitment to tackle this issue. Prior to exploring these practices, it is worth considering the following assertion by a prominent ATFD member, gathered during an interview with the conflict management researcher Loes Debuysere in 2014, which illustrates the contradictions and contestations surrounding the strategies of a Benalist state playing "an ambiguous role by at the same time adopting an emancipatory, 'feminist' discourse and a conservative…policy" (Debuysere 2018:33):

> "We were perceived as a political association: we were constantly repressed, our activities were almost held under surveillance, sometimes even prohibited. They often invented ridiculous excuses. For example, when we wanted to…rent a room in a hotel, they would suddenly tell us that there had been a flood, or electricity breakdowns, this or that, clearly because they didn't want to tell us that they didn't want us there" (Ibid).

The Benalist authorities' strategies of intimidation against the independent feminist organisations were also reported in international media. For example, an article released by *AllAfrica* in November 1998 revealed that "CSOs, including ATFD, have had their office under police surveillance, their members and leaders imprisoned, interrogated, followed and harassed by police, their meetings and other activities banned or disrupted, their mail confiscated and their telephones tapped" (All Africa 1998: para.11). The state also stalled granting funds originating from the European Parliament for several of AFTURD's projects (Agence Europe 2005: para.2),

including a project on positive action for women's rights of citizenship and equal opportunities in the Maghreb (European Parliament 2009: para.22). This highlights the contradictions of Benalism: while the state sought to control and marginalise independent feminist organisations, these very pressures reveal the dynamics that shaped – and constrained – their functioning. Analysing ATFD and AFTURD as epistemic communities allows these dynamics to come into sharper focus.

4.4.1 ATFD's regional norm-setting and policy advocacy for equal inheritance rights

Equal inheritance has been recognised as "one of the association's [ATFD's] core struggles" (Debuysere 2018:39), viewing the issue of equality in inheritance as part of the wider economic violence committed against women in Tunisia, considered to include depriving women of their inheritance altogether, of salary and property, social security, appropriate remuneration, and a place of residence (ATFD 2017:33). By framing economic violence as both a systemic injustice and a lived social condition, ATFD early-on positioned itself as a central norm entrepreneur in redefining GBV in Tunisia to include structural inequalities in wealth and asset distribution. ATFD commenced its campaigning against economic violence against women, focused on the struggle for equal inheritance, as early as 1990 (Moghadam 2022). Such efforts were initially launched by ATFD in concert with regional allies, representing a "localization of transnational knowledge…or the emergence of human rights consciousness among local women" (Ibid:5). This is in line with the lifecycle of the translation of women's rights concepts introduced by Sally Merry (2006), who theorised that knowledge brokers such as epistemic communities (in this case ATFD and its allies) "can work to translate women's rights concepts and ideas from the international arena for a local audience, in a process of 'localisation'" (Ibid:4). These women's security-focused epistemic CoP members thus focused upon drawing "on existing cultural understandings to resonate with, appeal to, and seek support from a broader public" (Ibid:3), explicitly exhibiting how culture is in the very performance of practices (Adler and Faubert 2022:50). This epistemic strategy saw ATFD perform simultaneous outreach and resistance: repackaging universalist human rights principles in locally grounded, culturally intelligible idioms, whilst asserting a radical feminist critique of male legal privilege.

From their inception, ATFD and AFTURD framed inheritance as both a socioeconomic issue and a site of gendered power imbalance. Their early research — roundtables, seminars, and reports — created an evidentiary and discursive foundation for later mobilisation. In this way, epistemic labour (reports, studies, publications) and activist practice (mobilisation, conferences, press campaigns) were interdependent rather than separate strands of action.

Reports were particularly important for creating a repertoire of arguments that could be deployed in public fora. For example, in 1991, ATFD was one of the main contributors to a compilation of studies on women and the law commissioned by the women-owned Moroccan publishing house *Les Editions du Fennec*, with ATFD member and Tunisian legal professor Alya Chammari authoring one of the key studies, *'La femme et la loi en Tunisie'* (Women and the Law in Tunisia) (Moghadam 2022:5). The inclusion of Chammari's contribution as a foundational text marked ATFD's early entry into regional knowledge production, offering a distinctly Tunisian legal feminist voice in a wider Maghrebi epistemic dialogue. This research directly fed into CME-95's agenda to place inheritance equality at the centre of regional debate, revealing the "salience of economic stability and security for feminist goals" (Ibid:4), and demonstrating how authoritative texts travelled into activist coalitions and shaped mobilisation strategies. Manifestly, there existed amongst these independent feminist organisations "common 'objects'…some kind of products derived from these exchanges…objects supporting and transforming the group and/or the individuals within the group" (Akrich 2010:3), which Akrich considers one of the key characteristics of a CoP.

Further, in 2003, CME-95 released a book titled *'Le Dalil pour l'égalité dans la famille au Maghreb'* (Dalil for Equality in the Family in the Maghreb) (Mahfoudh 2014:132). This publication aimed to tackle Sha'ria-influenced family law in Maghrebian societies, attempting to argue for its reform through a process of *ijtihad* (meaning 'effort' in Arabic and constituting part of the Islamic legal philosophical tradition of independent interpretation), evidenced also by the book's use of the Arabic word for evidence, 'dalil', in its title, which in an Islamic context means authentic Qur'anic

evidence, or the ‘word of God’ (Ibid). By anchoring feminist claims in Islamic jurisprudence and calling upon the interpretive tradition of *ijtihad*, ATFD and its partners sought to transform inheritance from a taboo subject into a legitimate site of theological debate. This represented a powerful agenda-setting move that reoriented public discussion from fixed dogma to dynamic interpretation.

Through this *ijtihad*, *‘Le Dalil’* also aimed to marry theory and practice, hoping to institute the principle of equality of inheritance in the region’s societies, as well as strengthen the mobilisation and negotiation capacities of women’s rights advocates through offering legal and socio-political arguments in favour of equality of inheritance, grounded in Shari’a law (Ibid). To this end, Ben Achour, along with additional Algerian and Moroccan CME-95 members, provided theological rationale for equal inheritance in the book through reference to verse 7 of the Qur’an’s chapter on women, ‘Surah An Nisa’, which “states that men shall have a share in what their parents and kinsmen leave; women shall have a share in what their parents and kinsmen leave, whether it be little or much, they are legally entitled to their share” (Moghadam 2022:5). The book went on to highlight that the half share is mentioned only in verse 11, and must be properly considered in relation to the social and historical context of the time when men often engaged in battles whilst supporting wives, offspring, and additional kin (Ibid). Contrastingly, the authors argued that gender roles were contemporarily undergoing considerable change, with women contributing actively to the workforce and therefore enjoying greater economic independence, citing in this regard Taher Haddad’s view on the Islamic ‘principle of social equality’, which emphasises the necessity of tackling problems “through a change in mores and through opportunities that one could hope to achieve over time” (Ibid). It was also argued that the “invisible and unpaid” (FIDH 2021:17) domestic work undertaken by women significantly contributes to family expenses and lessens pressures on the state budget. Indeed, the United Nations’ 2005 Gender Budget Survey would reveal that women’s domestic work amounted to over 47.4% of Tunisia’s GDP at the time (Ibid). Taken together, these arguments represent an authoritative feminist counter-narrative which fused jurisprudential reasoning, economic data, and social critique to produce a multidimensional understanding of

equality. ATFD's role in this campaign illustrates its function as a leading producer of gender-conscious legal hermeneutics and evidence-based advocacy. CME-95 thus formulated the book's arguments in a manner that would resonate with diverse readers – "academics, religious leaders, and ordinary women and men" (Moghadam 2022:6). This rhetorical flexibility speaks to ATFD's strategic norm-setting – crafting a discourse able to circulate across publics, mobilise varied actors, and shift the boundaries of the possible in inheritance reform.

Importantly, the reports and studies produced by AFTURD and ATFD did not exist in isolation; rather, they functioned as the intellectual scaffolding for mobilisation, providing the research-based legitimacy and discursive tools that activists could deploy in high-profile forums. In turn, these mobilisation events were not simply opportunities to disseminate knowledge but also arenas where new insights were generated. Public debates, testimonies, and multi-stakeholder exchanges fed back into subsequent reports and advocacy documents, creating a cycle in which research and mobilisation continually reinforced one another. This dynamic exemplifies the epistemic community function of ATFD and AFTURD: producing authoritative knowledge, whilst simultaneously embedding it in political practice.

Building upon this longstanding trajectory of epistemic mobilisation, on 16 March 2007, ATFD and AFTURD played a central role in a high-profile public forum titled "Equality in Inheritance: From Awareness to Legislation," held at the Al-Wahda newspaper headquarters (Tunisnews 2007). This event, details of which were uncovered through research of the *Tunisnews* Arabic-language news repository, was organised by ATFD and brought together a diverse constellation of civil society actors, legal professionals, political representatives, and human rights advocates, allowing both organisations to steer the inheritance debate from conceptual awareness to demands for legislative transformation (Ibid). ATFD was represented by Ben Achour, who delivered a keynote lecture presenting what the article described as fifteen rigorously formulated social, economic, legal, and cultural arguments in support of inheritance equality (Ibid, translation mine). *Tunisnews* revealed that these arguments were the product of an extensive collaborative

research effort between ATFD and AFTURD, culminating in a jointly-authored book synthesising years of feminist scholarship, field engagement, and multi-stakeholder dialogue (Ibid). Further, during the forum, ATFD and AFTURD not only disseminated knowledge, but also actively shaped the discourse by defending reform as both constitutionally justifiable and socially urgent. For instance, Ben Achour's first legal argument directly invoked the constitutional principles of equality and citizenship, stating that existing inheritance laws violated the spirit of the Tunisian constitution and Tunisia's international treaty obligations (Ibid). This was reinforced by her seventh argument, which highlighted the inconsistency between unequal inheritance provisions and ratified international conventions, such as CEDAW (Ibid). These examples underscore the deliberate strategy of ATFD and AFTURD to ground their feminist claims in constitutional and international legal frameworks, thereby asserting the legitimacy and urgency of reform within both national and global rights discourses. Through their interventions, they confronted religious conservatism with nuanced theological reasoning, addressed socio-economic inequality through feminist economic critique, and challenged legal formalism with progressive jurisprudential interpretations (Ibid). Importantly, their participation in the forum was not passive; they actively engaged in debate, responded to critiques, and extended their pedagogical role by presenting case studies and testimonies drawn from their long-standing grassroots work with women across Tunisia. Their knowledge dissemination strategy was thus explicitly designed to resonate with a wide audience, including academics, legislators, religious scholars, and citizens, thereby exemplifying the performative and translational work of epistemic communities in politically-sensitive domains. This event, therefore, not only solidified their status as independent epistemic communities, but also illustrated their collective function as an epistemic CoP, co-producing locally-grounded knowledge in pursuit of legal and normative transformation.

Moreover, extending its sustained efforts in feminist knowledge production and transnational alliance-building, ATFD organised a significant Maghreb-wide conference "The Journey of Maghrebian Women Towards Equality" on 24–25 November 2007 in Tunis, supported by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. As revealed

through a *Tunisnews* historical media article, this conference formed part of an ongoing regional process that began in 2005 during the Maghreb Social Forum in Morocco (Tunisnews 2007). The event brought together feminist activists, legal experts, and CSOs from Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania to discuss regional gender security struggles, offering a platform for sharing research, grassroots strategies, and critical reflections (Ibid). Of particular note was the intervention by Dorra, who presented the results of a major sociological study carried out in partnership with AFTURD and the UGTT, under the umbrella of CME-95. The study, based on a survey of 1,500 Tunisians, probed public attitudes on a wide range of gender-related issues – including social roles, domestic violence, and equal inheritance rights. The empirical data revealed only 14% of Tunisian society clearly endorsing equal inheritance, and 46% opposing it outright (Ibid). When I questioned Dorra about this conference during our interview, she reflected that these findings underscored the entrenched cultural resistance to reform and the need for continued grassroots education (Interview, 17 August 2024). She particularly highlighted how internalised attitudes amongst women, especially in rural areas, often reproduced the very inequalities feminist organisations sought to dismantle. According to her, these dynamics demonstrated the urgent need for ATFD's feminist education efforts and culturally sensitive engagement strategies to facilitate attitudinal change and broaden support for inheritance equality (Ibid).

Details of the conference published by *Tunisnews* indicated that ATFD further facilitated knowledge exchange through a series of in-depth workshops focused on critical feminist concerns, including violence, reproductive and sexual rights, economic and social rights, citizenship and familial equality, and alternative cultural production (Tunisnews 2007). ATFD also used the occasion to disseminate practical tools for advocacy and support, such as its "Listening and Guidance Manual for Women Victims of Violence" (Ibid). The dissemination of such resources, grounded in empirical research and aimed at equipping both activists and survivors, exemplified ATFD's role as an epistemic community rooted in both scholarly rigour and activist praxis. Further, ATFD's orchestration of this multi-day, transnational forum showcased its commitment to feminist norm-setting and reflected its capacity

to engage in sustained knowledge production, data-driven analysis, and regional consensus-building – hallmarks of an epistemic community as defined by both Haas and Antoniades. By forging transnational linkages, generating authoritative feminist knowledge through empirical tools such as surveys, and strategically mobilising this knowledge in public policy discourse, ATFD clearly fulfilled the epistemic functions of influencing normative frameworks and shaping feminist agendas beyond the national level. The event concluded with the drafting of a final declaration, reaffirming the commitment of Maghrebian women's movements to advancing legal, cultural, and structural reforms for equality. It also represented a strong example of the work of a feminist organisation and epistemic community – ATFD – alongside likeminded allies, "seeking to make a culturally resonant case for change" (Moghadam 2022:17) as part of an epistemic CoP.

4.4.2 ATFD and AFTURD's domestic and regional norm-setting and policy advocacy for equal inheritance rights

As revealed above, ATFD successfully raised awareness of the discriminatory nature of equal inheritance legislation on a regional level, an accomplishment in itself given that inheritance law was *"so deeply entrenched that it was a confirmed fact for many"* (Interview, 04 November 2024). At the same time, ATFD also dedicated a significant portion of its domestic advocacy on women's security to equal inheritance, largely in joint effort with AFTURD. As touched upon in Section 6.3.1, in 2006, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the CSP's promulgation, ATFD and AFTURD co-authored and published '*15 arguments de plaidoyer pour l'égalité successorale entre les sexes' (15 Plea Arguments for Inheritance Equality Between the Sexes),* which ended by imploring the Ben Ali government to institute the following changes:

I. *Abolish legal privileges accorded to males;*
II. Modify Tunisia's inheritance law;
III. Establish inheritance equality between men and women (Arfaoui n.d.:24).

Also in 2006, AFTURD sponsored a research paper on the economic security issue of equal inheritance for women, titled “Equality in Inheritance, for an Equal and Full Citizenship” (Ben Salem 2010:13). Following the attention it received in policy circles, during the same year, AFTURD developed the research paper into a double volume book, with the first volume examining ‘Rights and Societies’ and the second book inspired by its joint research efforts with ATFD to focus on ‘Pleas for Equality in Inheritance’ (Arfaoui n.d.:24). Reinforcing the interplay between knowledge and activism, as part of the same CSP campaign, ATFD and AFTURD also co-organised a press conference on 11 August 2006 under the banner “Fifteen Arguments in Defence of Equality in Inheritance”, as documented in contemporaneous media articles from *Al-Wahda* newspaper, with the publication serving as its intellectual springboard and structuring the event’s agenda (Al-Wahda 2006). During the conference, Khadija Cherif, ATFD President at the time, characterised inequality in inheritance as not merely a marginal concern, but a pressing socio-legal challenge spanning economic, social, and political dimensions, requiring a holistic transformation of societal attitudes and legislative norms (Ibid). Saida Triki, thenPresident of AFTURD, reiterated this by questioning whether the CSP had truly exhausted its emancipatory potential, pointing to the results of a five-year interdisciplinary study, conducted by legal and sociological scholars, that served as the foundation for the campaign’s flagship publication (Ibid). The conference concluded with a debate involving representatives from civil society, political parties, and academia, reaffirming ATFD and AFTURD’s commitment to epistemic labour that was simultaneously legalistic, scholarly, and popular in its mobilisation; and exemplifying their role as interconnected yet autonomous epistemic communities that were knowledge producers and political actors embedded within broader struggles for women’s security. These joint activities support the CoP literature’s view of the nature of knowledge generation as “embodied, distributed, trans-human, and pragmatic” (Akrich 2010:2). They are also emblematic of how ATFD and AFTURD were doubtlessly “involved in a form of collective learning that made it possible to develop experiential knowledge and to articulate this knowledge with other knowledge sources…this collective learning leads to the production of documents, bibliographies, corpuses, and links; their frequent publicization commits the list to a first political work” (Ibid:16).

In keeping with this attempt to tackle equal inheritance through largely intellectual and public education efforts, in January 2009, ATFD and AFTURD also organised a Maghrebian seminar on equality in inheritance at ATFD's Tunis headquarters, titled "Nothing Justifies Discrimination in Inheritance" (Arfaoui n.d.:24), inviting women's organisations from Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania to attend, "allowing new acquaintances to be made" (Ibid) through international seminars. This made clear the "shared normative commitments" (Haas 1992a:19) between this epistemic CoP, and the technical, research-based nature of the knowledge it was attempting to disseminate on equality in inheritance.

This sustained epistemic and advocacy work culminated in a pivotal moment in March 2010, when ATFD and AFTURD, alongside CME-95 and the LTDH Women's Committee, convened a national conference entitled *"For Equality and Citizenship"* at the Golden Tulip Hotel in Tunis (Tunisnews 2010). This event, documented through archival research in *Tunisnews*, occurred just months before the fall of the Ben Ali regime. It also revealed how the cyclical relationship between knowledge production and mobilisation is central to understanding ATFD and AFTURD as epistemic communities. Structured across three thematic sessions, the conference opened with statements from ATFD and AFTURD, followed by participatory dialogue with attendees, reflecting the deliberative ethos characteristic of a CoP. The morning session featured interventions by prominent feminist legal scholar Hafidha Chekir on political reforms essential for democratic transition, and by constitutionalist Asma Nouira, who interrogated the evolving relationship between state and religion (Ibid). These discussions underscored a shared normative commitment to gender equality as a foundational principle of citizenship, a hallmark of the epistemic vision advanced by ATFD and AFTURD over preceding decades.

The afternoon was then devoted to the presentation and collective endorsement of *"The Women's Declaration"*, delivered by activist and ATFD member Yosra Frawes, which crystallised decades of research into a mobilizational moment whilst simultaneously producing a new authoritative text shaping feminist discourse (Ibid).

This declaration called for the codification of gender parity across political, social, and legal domains, and explicitly included demands for equal inheritance rights. Its adoption marked a performative moment of collective epistemic alignment, in which feminist knowledge claims were elevated as central to social contract in Tunisia, foreshowing the post-uprising practices of these organisations. In my interview, Ben Jemia recalled this national conference vividly, noting that it was *"one of the last ones prior to the uprising"*, and emphasised that *"all our [ATFD's] action was carried out in collaboration with AFTURD"* (Interview, 28 October 2024). Her reflections underscored the deep institutional coordination and shared vision that characterised the event, revealing how both organisations conceptualised and delivered the conference's intellectual and strategic interventions. According to Ben Jemia, the declaration presented by Frawes was the product of sustained dialogue between ATFD and AFTURD's legal and advocacy committees, aiming to construct a message capable of resonating across Tunisia whilst anchoring it in international rights frameworks (Ibid). She further observed that the event's structure and content emerged from co-organised planning sessions that ensured the integration of scholarly rigour with grassroots activist participation (Ibid), demonstrating how ATFD and AFTURD acted as both distinct epistemic communities and as a unified epistemic CoP.

Seen in this light, the various inheritance campaigns were not a series of disconnected activities but a sustained epistemic cycle, as ATFD and AFTURD leveraged their long-standing scholarly expertise, activist networks, and grassroots credibility to shape national discourses on women's economic security. These dynamics highlight their role as epistemic communities whose authority derived precisely from their ability to intertwine research with practice, expertise with mobilisation, and feminist knowledge with public contestation.

Nonetheless, it was the position of the Benalist state that "any radical, quick changes could bring instability…Tunisian society was concerned with following the principles of religion without sacrificing progress" (Grami 2008:357). For example, two months prior to the abovementioned national conference, in January 2010 AFTURD was

prohibited by Benalist authorities from holding its sixth conference at a Tunis hotel (Tunisnews 2010). This followed an incident in January 2009, when Tunisian authorities barred entry to two Moroccan civil society figures from an event organised by AFTURD, with Tunisia's Ministry of Interior prohibiting AFTURD's event from proceeding and communicating to the Moroccan government that the individuals were "unwelcome" (Tunisnews 2009). This reflected Ben Ali's utmost concern with preserving the continuity of his political power and national stability, which this thesis has arguably enabled a more 'true' appreciation of, through its "explaining knowledge and power in and by practice" (Adler and Faubert 2022:47), exposing how "institutions, systems of governance and social orders are constituted not only by material power and organized violence, or exclusively by ideas, norms, values, and discourses, but primarily in and by practices" (Ibid:52). It also indicates that, following epistemic communities' scholars, for the claims of epistemic communities to be successful, oftentimes their knowledge "needs to acquire the social authority for being policy-relevant" (Lidskog and Sunqvist 2002:86). As the next section will reveal, this 'social authority' would materialise, albeit for a brief historical moment, following the 2011 uprising.

During the Ben Ali era, the domestic effort to tackle equality in inheritance was not however solely pursued through inquiry and research. Alongside its efforts to safeguard women's physical security discussed earlier in this chapter, ATFD's CEOFVV also received cases of economic violence against women, which included instances involving dispossession of inheritance. According to a 2017 report published by ATFD, the deprivation of inheritance represented 4% of economic violence cases dealt with by CEOFVV, and was usually exercised against women by their brothers, and/or children in the case of widows, and therefore approached by CEOFVV as a matter of economic *family* violence (ATFD 2017:41). A report published by ATFD in 2017 detailed the economic family violence perpetrated against one of the victims which sought help from its centre. The report describes that the woman worked abroad for a significant number of years and was able to send three-quarters of her salary to her parents in Tunisia each month to enable them to build a house, which they did and registered under her father's name.

However, upon her father's death, with no legal claim to the property, her brothers threw her out of the house and did not permit her to even occupy one of the rooms. She was accommodated at CEOFVV until she could return abroad, demonstrating ATFD's commitment to improving women's on-the-ground security at the same time as pursuing more intellectual and awareness-raising activities alongside AFTURD and other regional women-focused organisations. Through these methods, these organisations built a shared identity for themselves – "building common objects of interests and a shared understanding of the purposes of the group and of appropriate forms of participation" (Akrich 2010:4). As stated by Akrich, for this reason, one can speak of a CoP (Ibid).

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that independent epistemic communities, focused upon women's security, undoubtedly existed and pursued significant agendas during Ben Ali's rule of Tunisia, despite the monopoly on constructing and disseminating a dominant narrative on Tunisian women's security held by him. Its analysis focused upon the activism of the two most prominent Tunisian feminist organisations throughout this period, namely ATFD and AFTURD, primarily in the areas of GBV and equal inheritance, both within Tunisia and abroad. The functioning of these organisations as epistemic communities was clearly established; alongside how they came to form epistemic CoPs in their joint practices on women's security, which also involved additional local, regional, and international organisations sharing similar concerns and *modi operandi*. This is the first study I am aware of theorising these CSOs as epistemic communities, as well as subjecting the activities of ATFD and AFTURD under Ben Ali to rigorous academic analysis.

Although the existing literature rightly situates ATFD and AFTURD within Tunisian civil society, it often characterises them in limiting ways: some scholars portray them as constrained CSOs with little autonomy (Arfaoui & Moghadam 2016; Brand 1998), whilst others subsume them within so-called "government-controlled nongovernmental organisations", ultimately ineffectual under authoritarianism (Wolf 2023). Yet, as part of civil society, these organisations also performed specific epistemic functions – report-writing, knowledge dissemination, transnational

alliancebuilding – which qualified them as epistemic communities. This perspective highlights how they were able to exercise influence and shape debates, nuancing our understanding of Tunisian authoritarianism by demonstrating that sites of feminist knowledge production and circulation persisted, albeit in bounded forms. Empirically, this chapter thus challenges dominant portrayals of Tunisian civil society under Ben Ali as marginal or symbolic.

Theoretically, the analysis advances the epistemic communities framework by situating it within an authoritarian context. Most applications of the concept emphasise technocratic advice in democratic or international settings (Haas 1992; Cross 2013). The case of ATFD and AFTURD shows that epistemic communities can also emerge in repressive environments, where knowledge functions simultaneously as resistance, survival strategy, and limited policy influence. This suggests that epistemic authority is not confined to contexts of openness but can manifest even where regimes actively repress dissent – shaping debates, constraining state narratives, and embedding alternative discourses. Furthermore, by showing how ATFD and AFTURD at times operated together as a feminist epistemic CoP, the chapter extends Wenger's and Adler & Faubert's insights to illustrate how overlapping communities of expertise and practice can exist in hybrid, authoritariandemocratic transitions. Through the strategic translation of universalist norms into culturally-intelligible claims, the production of empirically-grounded feminist counterdiscourses, and the shaping of what constituted legitimate knowledge on GBV and women's inheritance rights at national, regional, and international levels, ATFD and AFTURD found alternative forms of success. Their influence was especially visible in the framing of public debates, the creation of data archives and feminist jurisprudence, and the cultivation of solidaristic networks that outlasted the regime itself. Ultimately, the case of ATFD and AFTURD demonstrates that epistemic authority may not always result in direct policy change, but it shapes discourse, constrains state narratives, and builds knowledge networks that survive political rupture. This insight deepens our understanding of Tunisian feminist activism, alongside broadening the theoretical reach of epistemic communities and CoPs frameworks to encompass contexts of authoritarian resilience.

Such vital insights were made possible through the framework re-visioning epistemic communities and theorising upon epistemic CoPs advanced throughout this thesis, validating Adler's and Faubert's declaration that "an IR agenda that can explain the epistemic foundation of international relations requires theory that combines knowledge, power, and practice" (Adler and Faubert 2022:76). This agenda could also open future research avenues linking the study of epistemic communities and CoPs to democracy, demonstrating how the strict boundaries between democratic and authoritarian systems can be obscured, as well as illuminating "the epistemic and normative requirements for the promotion of democracy at national and regional levels" (Ibid). Such phenomena will be more deeply interrogated in the proceeding sections of this thesis, as they chart the involvement of women's security-focused epistemic communities in Tunisia's 2011 uprising and the country's democratisation efforts since.

Part B

Chapter 5: The WSECoP, Women's Security, and Tunisia's 2011 Uprising

5.1 Introduction

In December 2010, Tunisia became the epicentre of a revolutionary wave that reverberated across the Arab world (Human Rights Watch 2012). The catalyst was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a young street vendor from the marginalised city of Sidi Bouzid, which marked the transformation of a personal tragedy into a national uprising that channelled Tunisian society's collective frustrations (ANHRI 2011).

This bottom-up surge launched a democratic transition that underscored Tunisia's distinct trajectory compared to other 'Arab Spring' cases, engendering a "novel revolutionary or rebellious impulse" (Sadiki 2015:703). Rather than following a universal democratisation template, Tunisia's path reflected the interplay of local traditions, cultural heritage, and democratic aspirations. This produced a contextspecific 'knowledge-making' process within which feminist women's organisations, such as ATFD and AFTURD – joined after 2011 by new organisations (detailed in Appendix Table 2), including '*Aswat Nissa'* (Voices of Women) – acted as crucial agents of change.

This chapter argues that in the immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's fall, these organisations – conceptualised as an epistemic CoP, hereafter the Women's Security Epistemic Community of Practice (WSECoP), as defined in the Introduction – played a decisive role in reframing political and social debates through the lens of women's security.[9] As Tunisia transitioned from autocracy, the WSECoP sought to challenge long-entrenched patriarchal norms across political, legal, and cultural

[9] As the Introduction stated, the WSECoP refers to the specific epistemic CoP comprised of feminist actors and organisations in Tunisia that co-produced and disseminated authoritative knowledge on women's security post-2011. Blending characteristics of epistemic communities and CoPs, the WSECoP is defined by its shared normative commitment to advancing women's physical and economic security, its production and institutionalisation of policy-relevant expertise, and its embeddedness within social and political structures – particularly through sustained engagement with, and sometimes contestation of, the state. The WSECoP is thus not only an ideational coalition grounded in common causal beliefs and policy goals, but also a practice-oriented formation engaged in iterative learning, capacity-building, advocacy, and norm entrepreneurship; operating at the intersection of knowledge and power to shape, implement, and challenge prevailing security discourses and policies affecting women.

systems, leveraging its collective expertise to embed women's security within emerging frameworks – such as the gender parity law. It later also transcended traditional advocacy to act as an agenda-setting and pedagogical actor in the transition process.

As this chapter will show, the new political order marked a shift in the WSECoP's role – from resistance of various of its constituent organisations under Ben Ali, to active engagement – initially centred on constitutional reform and embedding women's security and equality into the foundations of the new Tunisian state. Yet, the WSECoP's influence after 2011 was constrained. Whilst it succeeded in securing constitutional recognition of women's rights and progressive legislation, implementation was uneven and contested. Female agency emerged within Tunisia's evolving power structures, shaped by the legacy of state feminism and tensions between progressive and conservative projects. This chapter thus further argues that, much like ATFD and AFTURD's earlier entanglement with Ben Ali's cultural framings of 'La Femme'; the post-2011 institutionalisation of the WSECoP was deeply influenced by shifting governance models and competing secularist and Islamist ideologies. This is not to say that the role of the WSECoP was merely reactive, but rather embedded in the complex negotiation of women's rights, illustrating the interplay between democratic aspirations and socio-cultural realities in post-uprising Tunisia.

Whilst this chapter focuses on the WSECoP's formation and early post-uprising activities, it also notes that key members, particularly ATFD and AFTURD, sometimes undertook independent initiatives. As Chapter 4 showed, both had long histories of feminist advocacy and knowledge production, qualifying as epistemic communities in their own right. However, their work remained embedded in the WSECoP through shared practices, objectives, and collaboration. The WSECoP thus functioned as a collaborative framework in which individual organisations contributed distinct strengths to shared goals, co-producing feminist knowledge and shaping Tunisia's democratic trajectory (see Appendix Table A6).

This chapter applies a dual-layer lens: ATFD, AFTURD, Aswat Nissa and allied groups are recognised as CSOs that also functioned as epistemic communities. As CSOs, they mobilised constituencies and delivered services; as epistemic communities they shared normative commitments, causal beliefs about reforms and women's security, standards of valid knowledge, and a common policy enterprise – enabling them to produce and broker authoritative expertise. Read collectively as the WSECoP, they also operated as an epistemic CoP, bound by shared repertoires, mutual learning, and joint problem-solving.

Further, as the thesis' Introduction clarified, women's security is understood here through the human security framework, encompassing not only protection from physical harm, but also the structural conditions enabling women's political, economic, and personal autonomy. In 2011, the political opportunity structure available to WSECoP actors widened, bringing new issues to the fore, as organisations such as ATFD and AFTURD transformed women's security demands into non-negotiable elements of the democratic transition. This shift does not indicate a conceptual slippage, but rather reflects how women's security evolved in a transitioning state, in line with human security approaches that see *political, legal, and economic* exclusion as core components of structural insecurity.

This chapter draws upon legislative documents from Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly (NCA), the body tasked with conceiving a new Tunisian constitution after Ben Ali's fall; policy briefs by independent think tanks and international relations specialists such as the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; reports by local and international organisations including Human Rights Watch; news reporting from the time; content shared by Tunisians on platforms like *Facebook* and *YouTube*; four semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 with leading figures from women's organisations and independent activists; and relevant secondary literature. Analysis of these sources demonstrates that, in the post-2011 landscape, the WSECoP exhibited: shared norms and values bred through common goals and advocacy for gender equality; collective knowledge developed via collaboration on research,

training, and capacity-building; influence on policy through participation in policy dialogues and campaigns; and networking and alliances with wider CSOs.

This chapter proceeds as follows: it first engages the existing literature on post-2011 women's organisations in Tunisia, then examines the WSECoP's role in the enactment of Tunisia's gender parity law for elected assemblies (Law-Decree No. 2011-35), before concluding with an analysis of the key debates surrounding the October 2011 NCA elections.

Briefly, before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify my terminological choices. This thesis refers to Tunisia's 2011 events as an *uprising* rather than a *revolution*. This choice stems from the complexities surrounding the term revolution and its applicability to the Tunisian context. Whilst the term revolution is invoked to describe the toppling of authoritarian regimes, I believe that the nuances of the 2011 events require a more cautious approach, in line with broader debates in the rich literature on revolutions – though a detailed engagement with this literature lies beyond my scope. Scholars such as Theda Skocpol (1979) and Jack Goldstone (1991) define revolutions as fundamental transformations of both political structures and social hierarchies, accompanied by mass mobilization and sustained change to radically reconfigure power dynamics and societal norms. By this measure, whilst 2011 dismantled Ben Ali's regime, it did not yield the structural transformations typical of revolutions.

Instead, the term *uprising* better captures the grassroots, spontaneous nature of the 2011 events, also remaining attentive to the experiences of marginalised groups, including women, whose struggles for equality predated and outlasted 2011. As Bayat (2017) argues, uprisings are disruptive moments of possibility, rather than completed revolutionary processes, with Tunisian women's organisations' activism demonstrating that 2011 was part of ongoing resistance. It initiated a prolonged and contested democratisation process, but many socio-economic grievances – regional inequalities, youth unemployment, and gender discrimination – remain unresolved. Scholars like Larbi Sadiki (2015) further highlight that Tunisia's transition has been

marked as much by continuity as by change, with remnants of the old regime enduring within the new political order.

5.2 Post-2011 Women's Organisations in Tunisia: Themes and Perspectives from the Literature

The literature on Tunisian women's organisations post-2011 largely situates them within the transformative dynamics of the new political landscape, which they argue altered the role of civil society. Scholars such as Charrad and Zarrugh (2014); Hibou (2015); and Voorhoeve (2015, 2021), classify these organisations as CSOs, central to Tunisia's political transition, particularly in advocating gender equality and safeguarding women's rights in the new political order. For example, Hibou (2015) stresses that CSO activism was vital in holding the state accountable and embedding human rights in the democratisation process, offering marginalised groups, especially women, a platform to shape the post-uprising state. Voorhoeve (2015) develops this argument, showing how organisations such as ATFD and AFTURD became key drivers of gender parity and legal protections. She highlights the successful inclusion of gender equality provisions in the 2014 Tunisian Constitution, particularly Article 46, which provides a legal framework obliging the state to promote gender equality. Voorhoeve ultimately argues that this was one of the major victories for feminist movements in Tunisia, as they managed to embed gender equality within the country's new democratic framework.

The existing literature also examines women's rights advocacy post-2011, emphasising the pivotal role of feminist movements in reshaping Tunisia's legal and political landscape. Grami (2015), and Voorhoeve (2021), provide detailed accounts of the strategic engagement of ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa within the transitional process, culminating in the inclusion of gender equality in the 2014 Constitution. These organisations successfully lobbied for gender quotas in political representation and a gender-sensitive legal framework extending protections from politics to social services. Roy (2017) broadens this discussion by also focusing on the political realities that women's organisations have had to navigate in the post2011 period. He examines how these organisations had to balance their

agendas against the rise of Islamist political forces, particularly Ennahdha. Whilst Ennahdha's leadership pledged commitment to women's rights, Roy argues that their conservative stance on family law and reproductive rights generated significant tensions with secular feminist organisations. As Voorhoeve (2021) notes, this ideological divide complicated the feminist movement's ability to fully realise its aims, especially regarding personal autonomy and sexual rights.

Charrad and Zarrugh (2014) explore these tensions in greater depth by analysing the debates surrounding Article 28 of the draft constitution, which initially defined women as "complementary" to men. The public outcry of feminist groups, including ATFD and AFTURD, involving protests and petitions, highlighted the political mobilization of women's rights organisations, shifting the discourse from 'politics from above' to 'politics from below', in which women's rights became an openly contested issue in Tunisia's democratic discourse. The eventual removal of the 'complementary' language from the final version of the constitution was a significant victory for women's organisations, signalling that women must be explicitly defined as equal.

Ultimately, despite such gains, feminist organisations in Tunisia continued to face resistance from political and social forces, a dynamic that the existing literature has effectively highlighted. The rise of Ennahdha and other Islamist groups produced a polarised environment, where feminist demands often clashed with conservative interpretations of Islamic law and traditional gender roles. As Ben Lazreg (2021) argues, the Islamist-secular divide has been a defining tension in Tunisia postuprising, with secular feminists advocating absolute gender equality against Islamist visions of traditional family roles. Equally, Youssef (2021) has provided an alternative perspective, arguing that feminist organisations showed strategic flexibility in navigating these tensions. She draws our attention to how feminist groups successfully built "unlikely" coalitions with both secular and Islamist political actors, allowing them to secure gender quotas and anti-violence legislation.

5.2.1 Beyond Advocacy: Women's Organisations as an Epistemic CoP in post-2011 Tunisia

Whilst the existing literature on Tunisian women's organisations provides valuable insights into their political role, legal advocacy, and post-2011 challenges, which this chapter also follows, none recognise the ways in which they fulfilled epistemic community functions. This distinction is significant because it reframes their role not just as advocates for policy change or as actors distinctive merely because of their feminist orientation; but as knowledge producers grounded in shared norms, learning, and situated practice. Viewed this way, they emerge as communities that *produce*, *refine*, and *apply* authoritative knowledge on women's security in Tunisia, offering several key insights previously overlooked in the literature.

Firstly, this perspective allows us to examine how Tunisian women's organisations collectively engage in practices of learning, knowledge production, and the application of gendered legal and political reforms. The dimension of *practice* reveals how they actively shape both the theoretical underpinnings of women's security and its practical strategies. It shifts focus towards their role as knowledge creators, building expertise through repeated interactions, discussions, and advocacy work continually refined through their shared repertoires – workshops, shadow reports, legal clinics, and advocacy toolkits. This underscores the internal cohesion and shared practices within these organisations, often overlooked when they are seen only as 'ordinary' CSOs, not fulfilling epistemic functions. The omission of this dimension in the existing literature is significant because it risks reducing Tunisian women's organisations to the role of pressure groups merely responding to political openings, obscuring their deeper function as knowledge communities that actively shaped the meaning of women's security and gender equality in post-2011 Tunisia. Recognising their epistemic practices reveals how they sustained feminist expertise across authoritarian and transitional contexts, translated it into legal and political reforms, and forged transnational alliances that amplified local struggles. This reconceptualisation yields an important analytical gain: it demonstrates how women's security was not merely a policy demand, but co-constructed as an epistemic framework that informed Tunisia's broader democratic trajectory.

Secondly, framing these organisations as an epistemic CoP uncovers the ideological and strategic adaptations they made in response to political and social resistance, particularly from Islamist and conservative forces. This perspective foregrounds the relational and processual dynamics of knowledge-building, often lost in accounts that treat them solely as advocates or mobilisers. Their expertise in law, constitutional reform, and GBV was not just the result of technical training or international influence, but cultivated through situated learning, peer exchange, and sustained engagement with state institutions and transnational networks. For instance, the negotiation of family law and women's reproductive rights in Tunisia becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of an epistemic CoP, as it highlights how these organisations' knowledge and legal reform expertise intersected with broader political agendas and cultural shifts. Advocacy, mobilisation, and legal reform thus emerge not as reactive strategies, but as components of ongoing knowledge-building processes within these groups. This level of practical engagement otherwise remains obscured in analyses focused solely on political alliances or policy outcomes, overlooking the continuous interplay of learning and practice.

5.3 The WSECoP's Role in the 2011 Uprising: Reshaping Tunisia's Political and Social Narratives

The role of Tunisian women in the 2011 events has garnered considerable attention from media, policy, and academic circles. Women were undoubtedly central to the uprising, not only as participants, but also as leaders and organisers within the democratisation movement (Charrad 2013; Marks 2013). Commencing from late December 2010, women's "conspicuous presence…whether as activists or bloggers or simply turning up on the street *en masse*", leveraging formal structures and informal networks to mobilize and advocate for change, astonished the majority of non-Arab commentators (Johansson-Nogués 2013:393). Indeed, a visual featuring a young Tunisian woman shouting whilst waving a banner reading 'Ben Ali, get out!' was at the time "etched into people's consciousness around the world" (The World 2017; Lahmar 2022). Although the wave of protests was not initially guided by gender-based issues, but rather "aimed to discredit and dismantle the politics of the Ben Ali regime" (Petkanas 2018:106) and end socio-economic marginalisation (Cherif 2014:1), women from diverse backgrounds – students, professionals, rural

workers, and homemakers – participated in both urban centres and smaller towns, reflecting the widespread dissatisfaction.

Amidst this national upheaval, the independent women's organisations active under Ben Ali, primarily ATFD and AFTURD, played a pivotal role. Halima Jouini, an ATFD executive board member since the 1990s, recalled that ATFD convened a General Assembly immediately after Bouazizi's self-immolation, inviting AFTURD activists to signal solidarity with the Sidi Bouzid demonstrators, with both organisations later mobilising their networks to participate actively in protests (Interview, 20 October 2024). This collective mobilisation represents a hallmark of an epistemic CoP, where diverse women's organisations, grounded in shared knowledge and values about gender justice, collaborated within a broader context of democratic transformation (Wenger 1998).

As recounted to me by Monia Ben Jemia, ATFD's former President (2016–2018), *"ATFD in many ways led and protected the revolution. We were at the demonstrations, and we opened our premises, 24 hours a day, to welcome demonstrators who were injured or fleeing from the police. All civil society, in particular the Tunisian League of Human Rights [LTDH], whose premises had been closed by the regime, met in our premises and it was from our premises that most of the civil society communiqués were issued, in particular those calling for a ceasefire"* (Interview, 28 October 2024). Ben Jemia added, *"our association was open…it was a meeting point for all…in particular it was a space that sheltered young people who had no premises and who were chased by cops"* (Interview, 20 October 2024).

As Ben Ali's fall became inevitable, revolutionary discourse increasingly polarised along secular-Islamist lines, wherein gender swiftly emerged as a key site of contestation. Women's organisations realised their role would have to extend beyond opposing the *ancién regime*. This realisation, shaped by poignant and challenging experiences during the uprising, was conveyed to me by Arfaoui[10], who recalled how *"we were not expecting that our existing rights (such as the CPS) would be*

[10] Khedija Arfaoui, the Tunisian activist and ATFD member introduced in Chapter 4.

threatened… this was the bad surprise that we got…I remember that as we were marching in the streets, young men would push us and say 'go home, go to the kitchen, go take care of your kids'. This was the beginning" (Interview, 04 November 2024). Such experiences echoed details reported by Make Every Woman Count (MEWC), an African women-led advocacy and training organisation, on the uprising. Their report highlighted attacks on women protestors by pro-Sharia Islamists, who accused them of "stealing their jobs" (MEWC 2013).

The WSECoP thereafter commenced organising protests to challenge patriarchal narratives that relegated women to secondary roles in political and social movements. On 29 January 2011, ATFD and AFTURD, together with LTDH and CME95, arranged a 'March for Citizenship and Equality' in Tunis to advocate for the protection of women following the uprising, ensuring that women's security would not be sidelined in Tunisia's ensuing political restructuring (Petkanas 2018:107). This demonstration was sparked by news that Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahda's exiled founder, would be returning to Tunisia the following day (Ibid). Demonstrators at the march carried banners with slogans such as 'Don't Touch my Personal Status Code' and 'A Constitution Guaranteeing Security for Tunisian Women', calling for the preservation and enhancement of women's legal and social gains (Voorhoeve 2015:1). A video of the demonstration, published on 30 January to the YouTube channel of an independent activist, also captured demonstrators repeatedly chanting the slogan '*La Tajamoʾ, La Rajʿeya - Mosawa Ḥakeekeya*' ('No symbolic inclusion, no backwardness – true equality') (Tyna Tunis 2011). These demonstrators totalled "three thousand people according to the organisers, when they had expected only a few hundred" (Kréfa 2016:121), rendering the demonstration an "unexpected success" (Ibid). Arfaoui explained that the visible presence of ATFD and AFTURD activists was itself a statement of agency, signalling their determination to shape Tunisia's future on equal footing with men (Interview, 04 November 2024). This involvement transcended advocacy, as they highlighted the intersection of political

repression and gender inequality, framing women's security as inseparable from the broader struggle for democracy (Charrad 2013:9). This moment highlights the WSECoP's adaptive strategies as they encountered and responded to gendered

backlash, challenging the space of women's rights within the uprising's broader political contestations.

However, ATFD and AFTURD not only spearheaded protests, but also worked to ensure that women's issues remained central to emerging political discourses (Ibid). Transforming gender issues from a reactive to a proactive stance, the WSECoP demanded accountability for violence against women during the uprising, alongside advocating a democratic transition enshrining women's security as a constitutional principle (Debuysere 2017:137). Their capacity to combine political action with knowledge production about women's security reflects their role within the WSECoP, where both the practical and discursive dimensions of activism were interwoven. This framework allows us to view Tunisia's women's organisations as knowledgecreators who leveraged their understanding of gender dynamics to inform national debates and shape post-revolutionary governance (Sabatier 1998; Wenger 1998). This active participation would set the stage for the continued influence of feminist movements in post-uprising Tunisia, demonstrating that women's security was integral to the vision of a just and democratic society. By framing demands within the larger narratives of dignity and justice, women's organisations ensured that the 2011 uprising was not only about political change, but also social and cultural transformation (Charrad 2013:10). Accordingly, and later joined by newer actors like *Aswat Nissa* and *Femmes et Leadership*, they exemplified the characteristics of an epistemic CoP: co-producing knowledge, advocating gender equality, and navigating Tunisia's contested socio-political landscape (Sadiki 2015; Wenger 1998). This dual role – as both participants and knowledge-creators – highlights the unique ways in which the WSECoP functioned. They were not just protesting for political rights alongside demonstrators, but simultaneously defining the very terms under which those rights would be recognised.

My discussion with Jouini additionally revealed that ATFD embraced two critical missions during the 2011 events – firstly to firmly oppose gender-based discriminatory practices, whether currently existing or potentially jeopardising the CPS; and secondly to educate Tunisians, particularly women, about the evolving political process (Interview, 20 October 2024). To achieve these goals, on 1

February 2011, ATFD, AFTURD, the Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH), and CME95 united several hundred pioneering feminists, modern activists, and young women in a sit-in at the Prime Ministry (Arfaoui and Tchaicha 2014:145). Their demands included urging the interim government to remove all of Tunisia's reservations on CEDAW and to ensure the preservation of women's rights under the CPS (Ibid).[11]

As part of the same WSECoP, these organisations collectively co-constructed knowledge that shaped their advocacy, drawing from both their historical experience and the demands of a rapidly changing political environment (Wenger 1998; Brown 2004). As explored in-depth in Chapter 4 of this thesis, AFTURD and ATFD had conducted extensive research on inheritance rights in Tunisia, which constituted a significant barrier to the country's full ratification of CEDAW (ATFD 2010). Their findings highlighted the discriminatory nature of existing laws, which entitled male relatives to inherit twice the share of their female counterparts from a parent's estate (Arfaoui and Tchaicha 2014:145). This existing knowledge-sharing network amongst these organizations would play a crucial role in framing the discourse around inheritance rights in 2011, providing a foundation upon which they could build their campaigns and advocacy efforts (Brown 2004). However, these activists also acknowledged the formidable challenge of enacting legislative changes to this practice. Unlike polygamy, the rules governing inheritance were considered a direct and unequivocal command from God as conveyed in the Qur'an, making reform a

particularly contentious issue. In an interview conducted by Loes Debuysere with ATFD member Bakhta Elcadhi in October 2014, Elcadhi's account of the struggle to uplift reservations to CEDAW is striking:

[11] In 1985, Tunisia ratified specific provisions of CEDAW, but did not adopt the general declaration. The Tunisian government expressed reservations about four articles: Articles 9, 15, 16, and 29. **Article 9, §2:** Tunisia reserved its position on the provision granting both parents equal rights to pass their nationality to their children; **Article 15, §4:** Reservations were made regarding the provision on women's rights to choose their residence and home. The government stipulated that this should not contradict Articles 23§[3] and 61[4] of the Personal Status Code (CPS), which address similar issues; **Article 16 (1) §§ c, d, f, g, h:** Tunisia declared it would not adhere to these clauses as they conflicted with CPS provisions concerning the assignment of family names to children and property inheritance. **Article 29, §1:** Tunisia objected to the clause allowing disputes to be submitted to arbitration or the International Court of Justice without the consent of all parties involved (ATFD 2010; https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1341362/1930_1335968624_atfd-tunisia-cedaw47-en.pdf).

> *"They [Islamists] said: 'You know, CEDAW, that sounds like SIDA [French acronym for AIDS], you women also want homosexuality.' That's how they initially waged a campaign against CEDAW"* (Debuysere 2017:180).

Nonetheless, sustained advocacy by ATFD and AFTURD bore fruit on 16 August 2011, when the interim government announced the removal of Tunisia's reservations to CEDAW (Ibid). This milestone was celebrated as a significant step forward for women's security in the country, as well as illustrated how the knowledge the WSECoP co-constructed, through their collective experiences and shared understanding, directly informed both their advocacy strategies and their ability to influence policy change. However, as proceeding sections of this chapter will reveal, this development was, in many ways, a premature victory, shedding light on the inherent paradoxes and tensions that continued to shape Tunisia's democratic transition. The epistemic CoPs framework enables us to see these tensions clearly: whilst the WSECoP achieved significant victories, they also had to contend with ongoing societal and political resistance, particularly from conservative and Islamist groups. The dynamic nature of these challenges demonstrates how knowledge – specifically knowledge about gender, politics, and law – shapes both the success and the limits of political reform in a transitional society.

5.4 From Political Transformation to Constitutional Reform: The AgendaSetting and Pedagogical Influence of the WSECoP in Tunisia's Democratic Transition

In late February 2011, a transitional authority body – 'The Higher Authority for Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition' ('Higher Authority' or 'Authority') was established to uphold the transition's popular legitimacy and guide the legislative process (Debuysere 2017:230). As emphasised by Jouini, both ATFD and AFTURD were acutely aware of the stakes involved in the constitutional drafting process following the 2011 uprising. Recognising that this moment represented a pivotal opportunity to reshape the state's legal and institutional framework, they mobilised early and strategically to influence the composition of the constitutional assembly and the prioritisation of issues on the drafting agenda, actively seeking to ensure that women's rights and

broader questions of social justice *"would not be marginalised in the foundational legal document of post-revolutionary Tunisia"* (Interview, 20 October 2024). As recognised experts in the field of women's security, these organisations were invited as consultative partners for the transition.

The composition of the High Authority was the eventual result of negotiations between then-Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi and a coalition of political parties, CSOs, and unions (Ibid). In March 2011, Ghannouchi's successor, Beji Caid Essebsi, formally appointed the Authority's members based on recommendations from its leadership, including its president, renowned legal scholar Yadh Ben Achour (Inclusive Security 2018:34). The leadership prioritised diversity in its composition, ensuring representation across geographical regions and including youth and women among the Authority's 155 members (Ibid). The WSECoP also undoubtedly played a pivotal role in securing representation within the High Authority, actively facilitating the election of a woman as vice president and supporting the selection of three of the six female members on the Authority's committee of experts (Borrillo 2019:59). This High Authority determined that a new Tunisian Parliament, the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), would be elected on 23 October 2011 and tasked with drafting a new Constitution. Notably, three of the sixteen members of the Superior and Independent Instance for the Elections (ISIE), which organised the NCA elections, were women (Ibid).

From an epistemic CoPs perspective, the WSECoP's participation in this consultative process exemplifies how shared knowledge and collective action directly influenced the political agenda. The WSECoP's ability to incorporate feminist perspectives into the constitutional drafting process demonstrates the epistemic authority that the community held, positioning them as key knowledge brokers within Tunisia's political transformation. Their expertise, forged through decades of advocacy, gave these women's organisations the necessary credibility to negotiate for tangible representation and policy change in a crucial transitional body.

In line with its mandate, the Higher Authority established the framework for the

October 2011 NCA elections, which included Decree-Law No.2011-35. Issued on 10 May 2011, it implemented the concept of vertical parity, commonly known as the "vertical zipper", mandating an alternating order of male and female candidates on all party lists. Article 16 explicitly stated:

> "Candidacies shall be presented on the basis of equality between men and women. Candidates will be included in the lists on the basis of alternation of the names of men and women" (Official Gazette of the Republic of Tunisia:2011).

This legislation represented the first legal recognition of gender parity in Tunisian history, and largely came about through the efforts of the WSECoP. In the words of Amel Mahfoudh, a Tunisian gender academic and daughter of one of the Taher Haddad Club's founding members, Dorra Mahfoudh: *"The inclusion of the gender parity law only came about following a gruelling tête-a-tête between feminist organisations, such as ATFD and others, and the Higher Authority. ATFD had succeeded in getting two of its members appointed to the Authority's committee of experts, and tasked them with advocating for a vertical parity provision resembling that of France's"* (Interview, 07 August 2024). Indeed, as emphasised by an *Inclusive Security* research report prepared in 2018, "women in the committee of experts…were determined to incorporate gender into key policies. Their strategy was to ask for more rights and to put the ceiling high – not give an opportunity to people for regression or going backwards" (Inclusive Security 2018:35).

In this way, the WSECoP's shared vision of women's security catalysed the introduction of vertical parity into Tunisian law, drawing on both international precedents (such as the French model) and local struggles for equality. Grounding this achievement in my thesis' definition of women's security, parity must be seen not only as a measure against discrimination, but as a structural guarantee of women's political autonomy – ensuring access to decision-making spaces that is central to living free from want, fear, and indignity. Its strategic advocacy to embed gender parity as a central feature of the transitional political framework highlights the

WSECoP's agenda-setting power, as it not only influenced legal reforms but also determined the political priorities during a critical moment in Tunisia's democratic transition. By successfully advancing this issue, the community shaped the discourse on gender parity, ensuring it remained at the forefront of the political agenda and paved the way for its institutionalisation within the new political structure.

Indeed, highlighting the contributions of WSECoP members, Mahfoudh disclosed during our discussion that the Higher Authority was not inherently supportive of implementing a gender parity law. When ATFD and AFTURD introduced the concept to the Authority in late March 2011, presenting their research on France's 2000 gender parity legislation in hopes of securing backing for a similar initiative in Tunisia, the initial endorsement by Essebsi was subsequently rescinded due to opposition from various conservative groups (Interview, 07 August 2024). This tension reveals the contested nature of the WSECoP's influence, which actively navigated political resistance from conservative factions whilst simultaneously persuading key decision-makers on the importance of gender parity. By strategically using its expert status, it created an environment where gender parity became an undeniable political necessity. In response to Essebsi's *volte face*, on 18 April 2011, ATFD released a statement titled 'We Revolted Together, Let's Build Together, No Turning Back on Parity'. It was accessed by this author through a version published in Arabic on the organisation's Facebook page, which I translated and consider beneficial to quote at length here:

> "At a time when the entire world stands watching what is happening in our country in terms of a general will to establish a democratic transformation…and at present when the principle of parity was celebrated by Tunisian public opinion, the independent and democratic women's movement, and all supporters of women's rights…we were surprised by the intention to retreat from the principle of parity through the speech of the interim Prime Minister on 16 April. Accordingly, we confirm our adherence to the principle of parity with alternation in the lists of candidates for the Constituent Assembly

> as a mechanism to push for gender equality and in recognition of the struggles made by Tunisian women throughout the history of Tunisia, in order to establish the values of actual citizenship and democracy. We confirm our rejection of the retreat from the principles of parity with alternation because it undermines women's right to equal participation in political and legal life and continues to exclude them from building the revolutionary Tunisia…At a time when we are looking forward to electing a Constituent Assembly that reflects the presence of all the forces that accomplished the revolution, from youth, women, and democratic activists from all parts of the country and from all popular groups, we cannot fail to express our surprise and disappointment at the insinuations that came in the minister's speech in an attempt to backtrack on this principle, along with additional U-turn proposals of the High Authority, in response to our demands of dignity, freedom and equality" (ATFD 2021).

Here again, parity was framed by activists not merely as a question of antidiscrimination, but as a fundamental component of women's security: securing equal political representation was understood as necessary for protecting the broader spectrum of rights and dignities on which women's freedom depends. Considering the parity law's passing less than one month later, this statement published by ATFD (which it would do well to mention also garnered support through 'likes' and 'comments' from AFTURD members on Facebook), highlights an additional important aspect to consider – the WSECoP's pedagogical role, alongside its agential capacity, in shaping public opinion on women. As an epistemic CoP, the WSECoP not only set the agenda for the constitutional transition but also educated the public, especially women, about their role in securing their own security. In this process, it mobilised legal and policy frameworks alongside cultural understandings of gender equity. ATFD and AFTURD's response to the government's retreat on parity clearly highlights the community's capacity to maintain a strong position and instruct about the importance of non-regression in the pursuit of women's security, serving as testament to their pivotal role in shaping Tunisia's democratic transition through collective action.

Evidently, the WSECoP's political negotiations and mobilisation surrounding the constitutional process began well in advance of October 2011, wherein their pedagogical and agenda-setting functions were also demonstrated through educational and awareness-raising campaigns, which I will now attest to in more detail. As recounted by Arfaoui in our interview, these efforts largely stemmed from the following concerns: *"Although there was a clear mandate to include women candidates on the October ballot, the question remained – would this be sufficient to motivate Tunisians to vote? Furthermore, would voters consider the stance of various candidates on upholding women's rights?"* (Interview, 04 November 2024). The WSECoP's pedagogical role became evident as they not only shaped the legal landscape, but also engaged the broader population in understanding why these changes mattered. Through grassroots campaigns, they used their status as knowledge experts to educate and activate citizens on the necessity of women's political participation. One notable example was ATFD's March 2011 campaign on women's political rights in the electoral process, the *Women's Caravan for Equality and Citizenship* (Borrillo 2019:60). This initiative specifically targeted the most marginalised regions, such as Kef and Bizerte (Ibid). However, following incidents of verbal and physical abuse against ATFD women in these regions, as well as a perceived growing trend towards radical conservativist values in lower-income neighbourhoods where Ennahda enjoyed significant support (Arfaoui and Tchaicha 2014:147), ATFD deemed it necessary to escalate its educative efforts, this time alongside the newer feminist women's organisations being created after 2011. As Mahfoudh explained to me, the strength of these new organisations resided in their independence from the Ben Ali regime. This distinction was expected to enable them to resonate with both secularists and Islamists, particularly as the latter still vividly remembered their harsh repression under the former regime (Interview, 07 August 2024).

To this end, a network was formed under the name *'Coalition pour les femmes de Tunisie'* (Coalition for Tunisian Women), comprised of 22 founding associations: ATFD, AFTURD, *'La Ligue des Electrices Tunisiennes'* (The League of Tunisian Women Voters (LTWV)), Equity and Parity, Aswat Nissa, *'Doustourna'* (our Constitution), Women and Citizenship (Le Kef), Women and Dignity, *'Kolna Tounes'*

(We are all Tunisians), *'Mouatna and Tawassol'* (Citizenship and Continuity), and *'Tounes Amenaty'* (My Tunisia, My Hope), amongst others (Arfaoui and Tchaicha 2014:147; Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh 2014:31; Inclusive Security 2018:32). By integrating both their agenda-setting and pedagogical roles, these organisations adapted their strategies to engage directly with the challenges presented by rising extremism, educating women on their rights in the face of such resistance. Embracing their educative function, the coalition actively engaged in preparing citizens to reflect on the key issues. Their work began in central Tunisia, specifically Bouazizi's birthplace of Sidi Bouzid, and quickly expanded to larger coastal cities like Sousse, Bizerte, and Sfax, as well as underserved urban areas such as Hai el Tadhamoun, a socially challenged suburb of Tunis (Arfaoui and Tchaicha 2014). These organisations addressed women directly, encouraging them to participate in the October 23 elections, not by endorsing specific candidates but by urging them to vote for parties that would safeguard their security as women (Ibid). This framing illustrates the way participation was explicitly tied to women's security. In line with the human security perspective adopted in this thesis, secure access to political representation was seen as inseparable from women's ability to protect themselves from structural vulnerability and to claim rights over their own lives. Additionally, in order to raise awareness about the female candidates running for the NCA and listed on party tickets, Faiza Skandrani, president of *Equality and Parity*, launched a Facebook contest a month before the October elections (Ibid). The initiative, titled *1,000 Women's CVs for the Constituent Assembly*, aimed to instil confidence in political parties about women's readiness and determination to take on leadership roles, as well as highlight the various women candidates to the general public (Ibid).

Similarly, organisations like Aswat Nissa demonstrated their agenda-setting influence in the months leading up to the elections. Aswat Nissa focused its efforts on engaging women in the suburbs of Tunis and rural regions, where female participation was notably lower. As Ikram Ben Said, the founder of Aswat Nissa, observed when I interviewed her:

> *"Our main focus was on promoting awareness and motivating women to participate in the elections. We visited different communities, explained how the electoral process worked, and organised mock elections. The goal was to help women understand how their personal lives are connected to political decisions and why their involvement matters"* (Interview, 20 December 2024).

Through these educational efforts, Aswat Nissa helped shape the political discourse, demonstrating how the WSECoP played a central role in raising political awareness and ensuring the integration of women's voices into Tunisia's political transformation. These functions of Aswat Nissa will be explored in-depth in Chapters 9 and 10, for example through examining efforts such as Aswat Nissa's Women's Political Academy. These forthcoming discussions further underscore the organisation's central role in women's security-making in post-2011 Tunisia and highlight the pivotal stature of Ben Said within the broader feminist and epistemic community landscape.

Comparably demonstrating the instructive capacity of the WSECoP, the LTWV at the same time launched a training-of-trainers initiative in rural areas to boost female voter participation (Tunisia Live 2011). In an interview with Besma Soudani Belhadj, the organisation's chairwoman, posted to YouTube by the Tunisian news website *Tunisia Live* on 20 October 2011, Belhadj revealed that the programme was rolled out in four villages located no further than 150 kilometres from Tunis, and was joined by over 80 women (Ibid). This initiative empowered women to lead electoral education workshops within their communities, equipping them with the necessary tools and training to then themselves educate a minimum of 25 additional women on voting, advocacy, and lobbying (Ibid). In Belhadj's words, she hoped the programme would help move Tunisia "from evolution; towards revolution" (Ibid). Additionally, the LTWV became the first organisation accredited by the ISIE to act as official election observers (Ibid; Inclusive Security 2018:32). In June 2011, the Coalition also released a memorandum addressed to the ISIE, emphasising the significance of implementing anti-discriminatory gender policies and procedures to ensure women's active participation in the electoral process and outlining the five following demands:

> “Honour international conventions that require fair and equal participation of women in the electoral process; Adopt a multidimensional approach concerning women’s participation, not only regarding the voting procedures, but also in ballot preparation; Put procedures into place to recognize women’s special needs: access to voting centres in rural areas, illiterate women, and women lacking identity cards for voter registration; Develop public awareness campaigns, apart from the work of civil society; and Guarantee equal representation at the administrative level at registration offices and voting centres” (Arfaoui and Tchaicha 2014:148).

It is thus discernible from the empirical evidence that the WSECoP, as experts on women’s security, recognised the critical importance of the 2011 NCA elections. With Tunisia’s future at a pivotal juncture, these elections were seen as a foundational step toward enshrining women’s rights in the constitution and establishing women as key political players in the emerging democratic landscape. By viewing these organisations through the lens of an epistemic CoP, we gain a deeper understanding of how they not only provided expertise but also actively shaped the political discourse through shared knowledge and collective action. This perspective highlights their agenda-setting power, as it was through their coordinated knowledge production – drawing on their historical activism, legal expertise, and democratic ideals – that they were able to guide the legislative process and ensure that women’s rights were firmly integrated into the constitutional framework. The WSECoP's role extended beyond advocacy; and it also acted as a pedagogical force, shaping public understanding and political priorities. Its efforts in raising awareness and educating both the public and political actors underscored its instrumental role in shaping both women’s security and Tunisia’s political future through knowledge-creation, mobilising action, and fostering a collective vision for gender equality in the new Tunisian state. Crucially, anchoring these initiatives in the concept of women’s security allows us to see parity laws, voter education, and representational struggles not as adjacent issues, but as core to the security of Tunisian women: structural preconditions for dignity, autonomy, and protection from harm.

5.5 Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly: The Limits and Contradictions

The October 2011 elections for the NCA were won by a landslide by Rachid Ghannouchi's Ennahda, which secured 89 of 217 seats, representing more than the next eight parties combined (Al-Quds Al-Arabi 2011). The outcome was expounded online as "the victory of Moderate Islamist party An-Nahda in Tunisia's first free elections nine months after people's revolution" (The Guardian 2011). Bearing in mind the decades-long suppression that Islamist groups had experienced under Ben Ali, this was a striking victory (Al-Quds Al-Arabi 2011). The victory also posed a shock at the time since, in the run up to the October elections, the political landscape that emerged had been predominantly secular, with only six of the newly established political parties identifying as Islamist (Petkanas 2018:113). Western media outlets described Ennahda's ascendancy as Tunisians' "first taste of democracy in 50 years" (The Guardian 2011), with local reporters similarly declaring, "Today, Tunisia chose for itself" (El Mekki 2011). There was also an overwhelming sentiment within the country that "those who support democracy must welcome the rise of political Islam" (Khanfar 2011), with Arfaoui also divulging that, for *'Nahdaouis'*[12], the events of 2011 and the NCA election provided the long-awaited opportunity to restore their repressed identities and integrate a more visibly religious expression into the fabric of Tunisian daily life (Interview, 04 November 2024).

The centre-left secular Congress for the Republic (CPR) followed Ennahda with 29 seats, whilst Ettakatol, a social-democratic secular party, claimed 20 (Petkanas 2018:113). Another notable result came from '*Arridha Chaabia*' (Popular Petition for Freedom, Justice, and Development), a newly established populist party, which unexpectedly won 26 seats (Ibid) (see Table 2 below for a list of the political parties established post-2011 in Tunisia). Together, Ennahdha, CPR, and Ettakatol formed a governing coalition which became known as the 'Troika'. However, this alliance sparked dissent, leading to defections from members of CPR and Ettakatol, who were unwilling to collaborate with Ennahda. Ennahda's decisive victory thus also

[12] A term which became popularised in secularist circles after the NCA elections to refer to those individuals who support and ultimately vote for candidates from Ennahda.

underscored the ideological tensions within Tunisian society, reflecting the salient divide between Islamist and secularist political forces, which the WSECoP would soon have to navigate. The outcome not only revealed the country's fractured political landscape, but also highlighted the complexities of Tunisia's democratic transition, where competing visions of governance – one rooted in political Islam and the other in secular modernism – began to vie for dominance. These tensions would become a defining feature of Tunisian politics in the years to come, shaping debates over constitutional frameworks, women's security, and the role of religion in public life, persisting as central dynamics in Tunisia's evolving political discourse to this day.

5.5.1 Gender Parity: Obstacles to Full Realisation

Despite the efforts of the WSECoP to advocate for women's participation, the election process ultimately offered limited advantages for women. Whilst the introduction of a gender quota and ballot structure were concrete 'wins' for the WSECoP which increased women's visibility, their practical impact was minimal (Arfaoui and Tchaicha 2014:150). For instance, out of 1,519 candidate lists, only 110 (7 percent) were headed by women (Ibid:151). As a result, in cases where a party won just one NCA seat, it was more likely that the seat would be filled by a male candidate (Ibid). Of the 217 NCA seats, only 49 were occupied by women, with 42 of these women representing Ennahda (Ibid). Furthermore, the highest concentration of female candidates heading electoral lists was in Tunis 1, where they accounted for just 20 percent (ISIE 2011). This highlighted the sparse representation of women candidates outside urban areas (Gana et al. 2012). A significant gap also persisted between the number of women candidates and the number of women ultimately elected as deputies (Petkanas 2018:115). This discrepancy arose not so much from the implementation of the gender parity law as written, but rather from the interpretive flexibility it allowed. Whilst the law mandated an approximately equal ratio of male and female candidates and the alternation of names on the lists, it failed to address the gender distribution of list leaders – a concept known as horizontal parity (Ibid). Indeed, as admitted by one of ATFD's members who had served on the Authority's committee of experts, Yosra Fraoues, *"we knew horizontal parity was too much at the time"* (Inclusive Security 2018:35), demonstrating an

understanding of “the risks of pushing for too much, too quickly…ultimately forgoing an additional layer of horizontal parity” (Ibid). Women consequently led only 7 percent of the electoral lists, despite representing nearly half of all candidates. Accordingly, as keenly perceived by Petkanas (2018:116), the structure of the election evidently further entrenched existing biases favouring men in politics. The closed-list proportional voting system placed considerable weight on the order of candidates within the lists. With so few lists headed by women, male candidates disproportionately dominated the seats won, highlighting the systemic barriers women faced in achieving equitable representation.

Additionally, media exposure for women candidates and issues concerning women lagged significantly behind that of their male counterparts (Arfaoui and Tchaicha 2014:151). This disparity became a central focus of workshops and conferences organised by ATFD in the aftermath of the elections, the results of which the organisation subsequently published in a media monitoring report, indicating that media coverage of male politicians far outpaced that of women during both the preelectoral period (August 1–25) and the official electoral campaign period (October 1– 23).

5.5.2 Navigating Tensions: The WSECoP’s Response to a Polarised Political Landscape

Although Ennahda did not outwardly oppose the gender parity law, with the election actually resulting “in a higher number of *‘Nahdhawiat’* deputies than female secular deputies despite the fact that the male-bias for the heads of the lists was nearly universal across the ideological spectrum” (Petkanas 2018:115), Ennahda and its female representatives did undoubtedly challenge secular women’s organising through their advocating for a governance system rooted more strongly in religious values. This political shift brought significant changes to Tunisia’s socio-political landscape within the span of just a few months, manifesting in both subtle and overt ways, and occasionally marked by violence (Arfaoui and Tchaicha 2018:154). Ennahda leaders may have presented their political platform as moderate and emphasised a governance model not bound by *Shari’a*, but secularists nonetheless

viewed their revolutionary ideals of dignity and liberty as having been co-opted by ultra-conservative rhetoric (Ibid).

Additionally, although secularists and moderate Muslims initially acknowledged ideological diversity amongst Tunisia's religiously-inclined groups, concerns grew in the aftermath of the NCA elections that these distinctions were fading. At the outset, Ennahda leaders, including Ghannouchi, had publicly denounced violence and softened their Islamist rhetoric of the 1970s and 1980s, aligning their governance vision more closely with contemporary Tunisian society (Ibid). However, secular feminists remained sceptical, accusing Ennahda of engaging in "double talk" – i.e. using rhetoric to obscure their true intentions (Ibid). They pointed to controversial statements, such as Ghannouchi's remarks designating the children of single mothers as illegitimate and their adoption as blasphemous; and the *Nahdawia* Souad Abdelrahim's criticism of single mothers (Ibid) to evidence their conviction. Significantly, this was also coupled with the new government's willingness "above all…to reverse the adoption of CEDAW, citing its non-compliance with the Muslim character of the Tunisian state" (Mahfoudh and Mahfoudh 2014:31).

The new female agency, as exemplified by the practices of the WSECoP, was henceforth directly linked to Tunisia's evolving power structures. These women's organisations had navigated the political landscape shaped by the tension between secular and Islamist forces, which revealed inherent paradoxes in Tunisia's post2011 socio-political changes. The WSECoP's involvement in the electoral process highlighted the contradictions within the country's democratic transition – on one hand, Tunisia's post-uprising political discourse had opened spaces for female agency; whilst on the other, entrenched patriarchal and ideological divides created a volatile environment for women's rights (Kandiyoti 2012). This paradox underscored that the WSECoP's role was not just a reactive one, but also fundamentally tied to the negotiation of women's rights and representation amidst these political polarities. The political empowerment of women was consequently both a product of the changing power structures and a battleground within them, as secular women's

organisations found themselves increasingly at odds with the rising influence of Islamist groups.

My conversation with Arfaoui revealed that the theory of “double talk” was further reinforced by the perceived inaction or delays by Ennahda and government officials in addressing escalating acts of violence by radical Islamist groups targeting women and freedom of expression. Notable incidents recounted by Arfaoui included attacks on female students and teachers for their attire or refusal to wear religious garments throughout October 2011, and sit-ins disrupting universities, such as the six-week closure of the University of Tunis (Manouba) over demands to accommodate *niqãb*wearing[13] students in December 2011 (Interview, 04 November 2024). These events also followed earlier instances of violence preceding the NCA elections. Attacks included the assault on filmmaker Nouri Bouzid after his call for a secular constitution, and the violent backlash against the broadcast of *Persepolis* for depicting God in human form (Ibid). Importantly however, Arfaoui stressed that these actions may not have represented the entirety of Tunisia’s ultra-conservative groups or their supporters. Nonetheless, they doubtless exhibited the growing tensions between secular and religious factions in the nascent post-uprising state, which was largely fuelled by those groups insisting on embedding ultra-conservative Islamic principles in the new constitution, a stance that it is crucial to state alarmed moderate
Muslims and secularists alike (Ibid). Hence, although the resurgence of political Islam cannot, following Kandiyoti (2012), be viewed as the sole, supreme circumstance lowering women’s security in the new Tunisia, following Ennahda’s victory in the NCA elections, secular women’s organisations undoubtedly found themselves at the heart of the broader societal tensions that defined Tunisia’s transition. As the preceding paragraphs illustrate, these organisations played a pivotal role in exposing these complexities to view, revealing the contested terrain over Tunisia’s emerging identity. Their actions underscored the paradoxes at the

[13] The niqãb, or ruband, is a long piece of cloth worn by some Muslim women to cover the entirety of their body and face, excluding the eyes. It is often viewed as the more extreme version of the *hijab*, which is used to cover only a woman’s chest and head.

heart of Tunisia's transition, as the newfound agency of women was intertwined with both the empowerment and the entrenchment of ideological divisions between secular and Islamist factions. How they manoeuvred within this volatile landscape to influence and safeguard women's security as Tunisia undertook the monumental task of drafting its new constitution will be the concern of the next chapter.

5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has examined the pivotal role of certain Tunisian women's organisations, conceptualised as the Women's Security Epistemic Community of Practice (WSECoP), in shaping Tunisia's post-2011 political and societal landscape. Their activism during and after the 2011 uprising exemplifies the ways in which these organisations transcended traditional advocacy roles to become knowledge-creators, agenda-setters, and pedagogical actors within Tunisia's democratic transition.

The chapter highlighted how the WSECoP leveraged its collective expertise to embed laws and norms productive of women's security within Tunisia's emerging political frameworks, notably through contributions to the gender parity. As an epistemic CoP, these efforts underscored the community's ability to adapt global feminist discourses to Tunisia's unique socio-political context, producing a distinctly localised form of democratic knowledge that addressed both international standards and domestic realities. Viewing these organisations as epistemic CoPs provided a deeper understanding of their role, not just as political actors, but also as collaborative knowledge-builders who shaped both the discourse and practical implementation of women's security issues. This perspective allowed us to realise the interconnectedness of their advocacy, learning, and policy influence, which might otherwise have been overlooked if their contributions were not examined through the dual-layer lens of CSOs *and* epistemic communities.

However, the analysis also underscored the inherent challenges and contradictions within this transition. Whilst the WSECoP achieved significant milestones, such as securing vertical parity and influencing public discourse, these gains were tempered by systemic barriers, including limited female representation in leadership roles and

resistance from conservative and Islamist factions. This dynamic revealed the dual nature of Tunisia's transition – as a space of opportunity for women's agency, but also a contested terrain shaped by ideological divides and entrenched patriarchal norms, constraining the transformative potential of the WSECoP's interventions. Indeed, the seeds of a potential backslide in women's security were already visible in this early post-uprising period. The ideological polarisation of the public sphere, increasing threats to certain women's organising, and the wavering institutional commitment to implementing gender-sensitive reforms revealed a fragile balance, foreshadowing the difficult terrain that the WSECoP would need to navigate in the years ahead.

Accordingly, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of how the epistemic authority exercised by Tunisian women's organisations continued to challenge Tunisia's socio-political structures even after Ben Ali's fall, reinforcing the role of civil society in advocating for genuine, inclusive democracy. Sadiki's notion of "democratic knowledge" is especially relevant here, highlighting the Tunisian democratization process as a constructivist and reflexive process that adapts to Tunisia's unique socio-political context. This 'localised' community, whilst drawing on global norms of democracy, also situated its activities within Tunisia's "makhzun" and "mikhyal" (cultural and intellectual reservoirs), producing a distinctive knowledge suited to the Tunisian environment (Sadiki 2015:704). This focus also aligns with the broader aim of my thesis to challenge the characterization of certain MENA countries as inhospitable to democracy, illustrating instead how diverse versions of democracy can emerge, as well as serves as a reminder of the importance of localised knowledge and agency in constructing a democracy that is meaningful within Tunisia's specific socio-political and cultural context.

Ultimately, the chapter contributes to a nuanced understanding of how certain women's organisations in Tunisia function as an epistemic CoP, revealing their critical role in the ongoing negotiation of gender, democracy, and societal transformation in Tunisia. Moreover, by situating the WSECoP within the broader socio-political and cultural dynamics of the post-2011 period, this chapter offers a

fresh perspective on Tunisia's democratic transition, illustrating how it is not merely a linear or universal process but one deeply shaped by local agency, knowledge production, and the interplay of competing ideologies. This exploration sets the stage for subsequent analysis of the WSECoP's engagement in constitutional reform and its efforts to institutionalise women's security in Tunisia's evolving political framework.

Chapter 6: The WSECoP and Tunisia's Constitution Drafting

6.1 Introduction

Tunisia's constitution drafting commenced in 2012, with the final text adopted on 26 January 2014,[14] marking a watershed in the democratic transition. Amidst postuprising political flux, Tunisia sought to redefine its future after decades of authoritarianism, balancing revolutionary ideals with entrenched cultural values. In this fraught context, the WSECoP became pivotal. As the previous chapter established, the WSECoP did not merely react to change, but proactively shaped Tunisia's new political order, ensuring women were not sidelined. Chapter 6 examines how its role evolved into direct engagement with constitution-making, influencing the legal foundations of women's security. Whilst focusing on the WSECoP's collective interventions, it also highlights the contributions of ATFD and, to a lesser extent, AFTURD as epistemic communities in their own right. Yet they also remained embedded within the WSECoP, united by shared methodologies, strategic objectives, and collaboration. This underscores the WSECoP's 'umbrella epistemic CoP' character, congregating distinct, yet interconnected, 'core' epistemic communities.

This chapter argues that the WSECoP's role as *guardian of the constitutional process* became a defining function during this period, theorised through two key undertakings: promoting civic engagement and information exchange; and ensuring accountability throughout the constitutional process. These will be explored to demonstrate how the WSECoP's efforts to safeguard democratic principles and women's security reflected its broader role as custodian of Tunisia's democratic future, particularly in shaping the constitution's substantive content.

This chapter focuses empirically on Tunisia's constitutional debates, because it was a rare moment where civil society actors could directly shape the legal and political

[14] The 2014 Constitution was approved on 26 January 2014 and officially promulgated on 10 February 2014.

foundations of the new republic, offering a discursive and institutional opportunity structure where questions of women's security, equality, and citizenship were negotiated. Within these debates, the WSECoP's epistemic authority was most visible – influencing legal language, intervening in public controversies, and mobilising both grassroots and elite actors in defence of women's security (Appendix Table A7 summarises these interventions).

I continue to treat these organisations, in line with the literature, as civil society actors. My analytical claim is complementary: during 2011–2014 they also performed epistemic functions – producing, brokering, and mobilising specialised knowledge across networks – in ways that amplified their civil-society leverage. The epistemic CoPs lens does not replace the civil society categorisation; it specifies how influence was exercised: through co-authored legal texts and model clauses, capacity-building for deputies, comparative referencing, targeted briefings, and evidence-led public advocacy that linked constitutional wording to concrete risks and protections for women.

The evolution of the WSECoP's influence must also be situated within shifting statesociety relations. As Chapter 4 discussed, under Ben Ali, organisations such as ATFD and AFTURD operated within state feminism's strictures, where discourse was state-determined and independent mobilisation repressed. Although the postuprising moment temporarily loosened these boundaries, Ennahda's ascendancy within the NCA reintroduced ideological boundaries – now rooted not in authoritarian secularism, but in contestation over religious framings of women. ATFD, AFTURD, and newer partners gained institutional access, yet faced renewed resistance in a transformed, but still antagonistic, state relationship.

Methodologically, the chapter employs a diverse data set, drawing on Arabiclanguage NCA proceedings minutes between February 2012 and February 2014;[15]

working papers from international organisations and think tanks like *Oslo Forum* and *Inclusive Security*; reports by ATFD, AFTURD, and Human Rights Watch; historical media articles; and four original semi-structured interviews. These primary sources are triangulated with scholarly literature to situate the WSECoP's interventions within Tunisia's broader socio-political landscape.

Focusing on the post-uprising period from 2012 to 2014, this chapter begins by outlining the constitutional drafting process and the political and societal dynamics shaping its trajectory. It then explores how the WSECoP safeguarded democratic principles by fostering civic engagement, knowledge exchange, and accountability. Key episodes include debates on Article 28's "complementarity" clause and mobilisation around Article 46 on gender parity, selected for their pivotal role in institutionalising women's security and exposing shifting power dynamics between feminist actors and the state. The chapter concludes by assessing the perceived backslide of women's rights post-uprising and the relevance of the Islamismfeminism binary, key themes also woven throughout the thesis.

This analysis addresses a significant gap in the literature. Whilst certain practitioneroriented reports, such as those by *Inclusive Security*, highlight civil society's role in Tunisia's constitutional drafting, no comprehensive academic study has systematically examined these interventions – let alone through the lens of epistemic CoPs. By tracing the roles, strategies, and interactions of women's organisations during this formative period, this chapter offers an original, rigorous, theoreticallyinformed account of how they functioned as knowledge producers and political agents. In doing so, it identifies key thematic continuities and ruptures in

[15] NCA debates are especially insightful, exhibiting the "sociopolitical cognitions of the different political parties in the way ideologies and social representations control political discourse" (Kammoun 2015:122). As demonstrated in Chapter 2, during the Ben Ali period, Tunisia experienced a singular political discourse – termed *"la langue de bois"* (deadwood) discourse by scholar Raoudha Kammoun – indicative of "a one-trend, one-track kind of thought that monopolized discourse" (Ibid). It is thus interesting to observe, through NCA proceedings, how this was transformed post-2011.

their relationship with the state, and theorises their evolving influence on Tunisia's postuprising legal and political architecture.

6.2 Background: The Drafting of Tunisia's Constitution: Consensus-Building, Contestation, and Civil Society's Critical Role

Drafting Tunisia's 2014 Constitution presented a pivotal moment in its democratic transition. Despite deep political polarisation, the process culminated on 26 January 2014 in a text widely-celebrated for its inclusivity, commitment to human rights, and navigation of ideological divides (Oslo Forum 2014; EUSpring 2015). As Bochra Belhaj Hmida, a prominent Tunisian lawyer, co-founder of ATFD, and former Member of the Tunisian Parliament (Assembly of the Representatives of the People of Tunisia) (ARP) recounted, *"Tunisia's civil society, political parties, and citizens passed the best constitution that was possible under the given circumstances"* (Interview, 17 December 2024). Hmida attributed this to the *"innovative mechanisms for consensus-building, active civil society engagement, and a sustained commitment to dialogue"* (Ibid), with policymakers accrediting the significant role played by the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet – a group of four CSOs including the UGTT (General Union of Tunisian Workers), UTICA (Tunisian Union of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts), LTDH (Tunisian League for Human Rights), and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers (Oslo Forum 2014:8; Petkanas 2018:158). Nonetheless, as this section will reveal, this landmark achievement in 2014 was neither inevitable nor uncontested; it emerged from complex negotiations, sustained activism, and intense struggles over state identity, religion, and fundamental rights.

6.2.1 The National Constituent Assembly (NCA): A Divided Foundation

As Chapter 5 detailed, the NCA was elected on 23 October 2011 with a one-year mandate to draft Tunisia's new constitution. Comprising 217 deputies, the NCA reflected the new Tunisia's post-uprising pluralism, yet remained deeply fragmented. The 'Troika' coalition – Ennahda (Islamist), CPR, and Ettakatol (both secularist) controlled leadership roles: Hamadi Jebali (Ennahda) became Prime Minister until late February 2012, Moncef Marzouki (CPR) became President of the Republic, and Mustapha Ben Jaafar (Ettakatol) was appointed NCA President (Oslo Forum

2014:4). Six specialised commissions addressing basic principles and constitutional amendment provisions; rights and freedoms; the judiciary, and executive-legislative relations were created to oversee constitutional drafting, which commenced in January 2012 (Borrillo 2019:62).

My analysis draws on two complementary working papers. The first is a practitioner background brief prepared for the 2014 Oslo Forum by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD Centre) in partnership with the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As the convenors of the Oslo Forum, HD Centre and Norway aggregated insights from interviews and closed-door roundtables with NCA actors, Quartet leaders, and international facilitators, rendering it a valuable source for contemporaneous, insider perspectives. The second is an academic working paper by Tunisian political scientists Hamadi Redissi and Rihab Boukhayatia for the EUSpring “North African Democracy and Citizenship” project (2015), used as a scholarly counterpoint. Their paper synthesises Arabic-language primary material and situates the constitutional bargaining in Tunisia’s party landscape. Triangulating these two sources with Arabic NCA minutes, media archives, and my interviews, I identify two cleavages that structured the NCA from inception – majority–opposition power struggles, and a secular-conservative cultural divide – and show how they surfaced across successive drafts during a three-year period, despite the Assembly’s original oneyear mandate.

The drafting process unfolded in four major stages (2012 – 2013), each reflecting shifting power dynamics within the NCA and mounting civil society pressures. The first draft (August 2012) alarmed secular and progressive forces, particularly Article 28’s language on “complementarity” between men and women, provoking immediate backlash from women’s organisations, including ATFD (EUSpring 2015:15). Article 1 of the 1959 Constitution – “Tunisia is a free, independent, sovereign state; its religion is Islam, its language Arabic, and its system is republican” (International Commission of Jurists 2015) – also provoked dispute. Secularists demanded explicit articulation of Tunisia as a civil state, whilst Islamists sought to enshrine Shari’a as a legislative source (Ibid:11). The second (December 2012) and third (April 2013) drafts failed to

resolve these tensions. By this stage, Islamists proposed constitutionalising the Higher Islamic Council and Shari'a-based frameworks, sparking fears of religious authoritarianism (EUSpring 2015:4).

My interview with Hmida shed light on the deep reluctance of many secular actors to negotiate with Ennahda (Interview, 17 December 2024). Ennahda, buoyed by strong public support, favoured counter-demonstrations or even a national referendum to reaffirm their electoral legitimacy, concerned that concessions to secularists would alienate their base (Ibid). Nevertheless, as policymakers later acknowledged, the pursuit of dialogue and compromise became a hallmark of Tunisia's post-2011 political landscape (Oslo Forum 2014:3). The fourth draft (June 2013) reduced some tensions, but retained over 20 key disagreements, including the preamble, role of religion, separation of powers, and fundamental freedoms (Ibid:2). This stalemate ultimately led to the creation of the National Dialogue, attempting to accelerate the process.

6.2.2 Mechanisms for Consensus-Building

Beyond the NCA, the constitutional process was profoundly shaped by the National Dialogue, launched amidst escalating political crises. The assassinations of secular opposition leaders Chokri Belaïd (February 2013) and Mohamed Brahmi (July 2013), attributed to Salafist jihadists, provoked mass protests and sit-ins demanding the Troika government's resignation (Oslo Forum 2014:5), whilst a rival sit-in by Ennahda supporters highlighted Tunisia's deepening polarisation (Ibid). It was within this precarious environment that the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet introduced a "Roadmap" proposing a technocratic caretaker government and deadlines for completing the constitution (Ibid). Their mediation between Ennahda and opposition forces proved pivotal in preserving Tunisia's transition, later earning it the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015. Although initially met with resistance – particularly from Ennahda, which feared a "soft coup" – ongoing protests and the looming risk of economic collapse, evidenced by the IMF's suspension of loan tranches in September 2013, compelled the party to accept the proposed compromises (Ibid).

6.2.3 Civil Society as the Engine of Constitutional Progress

Interviews with activists such as Hmida, and analysis of key working papers reveal that civil society played a central role throughout the constitutional process – beyond the Quartet – acting as watchdog, mediator, and advocate for democratic principles. One prominent example is 'Bawsala' (The Compass), founded in 2012, which provided real-time oversight of the NCA's activities, including debates, attendance, and voting, and made this data publicly available (EUSpring 2015:6). Such transparency was crucial during the 2013 political assassinations, when public trust in the NCA was severely shaken. As Tunisian scholars Hamadi Redissi and Rihab Boukhayatia argued, civil society's watchdog efforts helped preserve the legitimacy of the constitutional process amidst political turbulence (Ibid:18).

Within this context of robust civic engagement, secular women's organisations played a vital role in shaping the constitution and enshrining protections for women's security – the focus of the next section. However, as this chapter argues, these actors were more than civil society participants: they formed a localised epistemic CoP, defined by shared expertise, collective identity, and commitment to women's security.

6.3 The WSECoP's Role in Safeguarding the Constitutional Process

6.3.1 Fostering Civic Engagement and Knowledge Exchange

This section exemplifies how the WSECoP acted as a guardian of Tunisia's constitutional process by fostering civic engagement and knowledge exchange, both within and beyond formal decision-making spaces. Through strategic advocacy, mobilising expert knowledge, and participation in NCA drafting committees, it worked to embed protections for women's security within the new legal framework.

The WSECoP's efforts to engage citizens through knowledge exchange commenced even before the official drafting process in 2012. According to ATFD's 2015 memoir recounting its role in the transition process, on International Women's Day, 08 March 2011, ATFD, AFTURD, and the UGTT and LTDH women's committees launched a

campaign titled *'From the Popular Revolution to an Egalitarian Constitution'* (ATFD 2015). This initiative issued eight constitutional proposals, stressing the practical necessity for women's equality within the family – particularly around inheritance – and in public and authoritative positions, which was later shared by thousands on Tunisian social media sites (Ibid). The act of circulating this text and gathering support for it underscores these organisations as a CoP, generating and disseminating shared knowledge about women's rights during nascent political transformation. As Arfaoui, the ATFD activist I introduced in Chapter 4, stated: *"our early efforts directly made women's issues central to constitutional conversations"* – positioning them as knowledge producers advocating for systemic change (Interview, 04 November 2024).

On 13 March 2011, ATFD, AFTURD, CME-95, and the LTDH's women's committee co-authored the *'Manifesto of Women for Equality and Citizenship'* (Ibid), which condemned GBV and women's marginalisation, and called for constitutional commitments against them, as well as to non-discrimination, gender equality, and the separation of politics and religion (ATFD 2015). Whilst Grami (2018) notes similar legal reform lobbying by ATFD and AFTURD, she categorises them as CSOs (Ibid:41), which they indeed were. However, I wish to demonstrate here that they also demonstrated epistemic functions. Key characteristics of epistemic communities include their ability to generate, validate, and disseminate expert knowledge, and to align this expertise with policy-making to address complex governance challenges. Similarly, CoPs emphasise collaborative knowledge production, shared learning, and strategic alignment among members to achieve systemic change. The *Manifesto* and related efforts were not only advocacy tools, but frameworks articulating a redefinition of women's security – from mere participation to systemic overhaul of gender relations in the legal and political spheres, rooted in both local realities and international standards. In this sense, rights-based claims were not pursued as ends in themselves, but as preconditions for women's security – ensuring physical integrity, autonomy in family life, and the capacity to participate equally in shaping Tunisia's political future. Further, by co-creating and applying specialised knowledge, these organisations shaped constitutional discourse in ways that explicitly

underscored their epistemic undertakings. Their strategic, knowledge-based interventions exemplify the core characteristics of epistemic CoPs.

Select excerpts from the *Manifesto*, published in French and Arabic and translated by this author from the latter, cogently highlight the WSECoP's role as both constitutional custodian and epistemic agent:

> *"We proclaim our adherence – as feminists – to the cause of women and our commitment to continue the fight for the improvement of their conditions, as well as our determination to fight against all forms of discrimination and violence against women…against socioeconomic marginalisation…against voices of reaction…against repression and all forms of authoritarianism…We affirm our commitment to the progress made in personal status and family laws…and which we demand to be reformed in an egalitarian direction…to the political participation of women…and the improvement of their access to decision-making centres…We declare our determination to campaign for the improvement of all these rights…to dedicate women's rights to work, to health, to modern education…to integrate the issue of women's rights among the priorities for action of political and civil society…by guaranteeing in the new constitution the principle of separation of politics and religion, by giving full reality to the principle of equality…by protecting the physical and moral integrity of women…We consider these principles and guidelines as essential…to the guarantee of sustainable human development in Tunisia"* (ATFD, AFTURD, Collectif Maghreb Égalité 95, and LTDH 2011, translation mine).

This call to action exemplifies the WSECoP's dual function: mobilising civic engagement and positioning itself as constitutional guardian. The *Manifesto* was not only a mobilising document, but also a strategic intervention aimed at ensuring women's rights were codified as integral to Tunisia's democratic future. The WSECoP, through its collective expertise, was therefore positioned as early as 2011 as a political agent and a guarantor of women's security within the broader transition process. Applying the framework of epistemic CoPs reveals how the WSECoP

leveraged both local knowledge and global feminist discourse to push for substantive constitutional reform. Further, unlike Western feminist networks, which typically contest frameworks within more stable conditions, the WSECoP emerged amidst volatility. Its advocacy was not simply about securing policy outcomes; it was about shaping Tunisia's democratic foundations, with the WSECoP's leadership affirming women's security as a pillar of democratic legitimacy.

I was also made aware of another effort WSECoP-led initiative to safeguard the constitutional process and women's security during my interview with Monia Ben Jemia, former ATFD President (2016–2018). Ben Jemia recounted: *"We organised a mock National Constituent Assembly ('La Constituante Fictive') in February 2012, to which we invited the elected Vice President of the National Assembly, Nahdawia Meherzia Laabidi, who supported our work in line with Ennahda's general stance, which was OK with gender equality in the public sphere, but not within the private realm, particularly regarding family matters"* (Interview, 20 October 2024). This initiative exemplifies the functioning of epistemic communities, which leverage specialised knowledge and shared norms to influence policymaking (Haas 1992). Through the *Constituante Fictive*, ATFD synthesised and disseminated knowledge aimed at shaping constitutional discourse, whilst fostering civic engagement amongst diverse stakeholders.

Inviting Labidi also underscores the WSECoP's attempt to bridge ideological divides, aiming to achieve the most favourable constitutional outcome for women. The *Constituante Fictive'*s first session was chaired by LTDH women's committee president and jurist Hafidha Chekir, with subsequent sessions led by Hmida and organised into 'Principles', 'Rights', and 'Mechanisms' committees (Borrillo 2019:61). Ben Jemia herself chaired the 'Mechanisms' committee, with those remaining led by frontline ATFD activists Sana Ben Achour and Najet Yacoubi (Interview, 20 October 2024). Local media coverage from the time also indicates that the sessions, which took place at Tunis' *Palais des Congrès*, were attended by NCA deputies, AFTURD and LTDH members, and feminist activists from Morocco and Palestine (Gnet News 2012).

In June 2012, this mock NCA published a mock constitution entitled *'La Constitution aux yeux des femmes'* (The Constitution in Women's Eyes'), which Ben Jemia stated was distributed to all constituents and MPs in Tunis (Interview, 20 October 2024). Similarly, in an interview with gender and Islam researcher Sara Borrillo, Ahlem Belhadj[16], then-ATFD President, recalled:

> *"We published more than twenty thousand copies and distributed them everywhere…We contacted the president and the deputies of the NCA and gave them – one by one – our text"* (Borrillo 2019:61).

Further, Ben Achour noted in a 2016 interview with Inclusive Security that ATFD's advocacy targeted persuadable NCA deputies who became "like a bridge between civil society and the assembly in some parties" (Inclusive Security 2018:41). This dissemination process illustrates the epistemic CoPs model, wherein sustained interaction and mutual sharing of expertise enable members to act as knowledge exchange facilitators (Wenger 1998). By producing and distributing the women's constitution, WSECoP members positioned themselves as authoritative voices and reinforced their civic engagement mandate.

Whilst reading the original Arabic version of this women's constitution, several articles highlight the WSECoP's effort to engage with policymakers and produce germane knowledge throughout the constitutional process, with the aim of serving Tunisian women. Articles 1 to 5 outline general principles guaranteeing equality between women and men in public and private life, full female citizenship, and nondiscrimination in accordance with CEDAW, whilst also mandating protection from all forms of violence. Articles 6 to 10 assert civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights based upon "complete and effective equality between male and female citizens" (Article 7), and equal rights and duties in marriage, parental authority, and child-rearing, regardless of marital status (Article 8). Articles 15 to 22

[16] 16 Belhadj passed away in Tunis on 11 March 2023.

call for constitutionalising gender parity in law-making (Article 15), integrating international human rights treaties into domestic legislation (Article 17), and enacting comprehensive laws to combat GBV (Article 19) (ATFD 2012, translation mine). By drawing from international human rights frameworks like CEDAW, the WSECoP positioned itself as a Tunisian conduit for global norms, translated into grounded, context-specific proposals. Further, by basing constitutional clauses around equality and protection from violence, the WSECoP made clear that representation was inseparable from security: without equal standing in law and institutions, Tunisian women's everyday safety and autonomy would remain precarious.

As stated by Ben Jemia, the women's constitution's 'trending' on social media platforms and targeted lobbying of progressive MPs by ATFD and AFTURD, led to the inclusion of certain ATFD members in the NCA's Commission for Rights and Freedoms (henceforth Commission) in July 2012 (Interview, 20 October 2024). ATFD's collective memoir suggests that this was also influenced by earlier coordinated pressure, such as the February 2012 solidarity gathering with the UGTT after it was denied the right to strike, which brought together activists from ATFD, AFTURD, the Committee of Women of LTDH, and other civic bodies, denouncing all practices undermining civil society (UGTT 2012; ATFD 2015). These coordinated efforts reflect the dynamics of epistemic communities, which leverage collective expertise and advocacy to address shared policy challenges (Adler & Haas 1992). Additionally, Belhadj's personal lobbying efforts as ATFD president were also instrumental. In her interview with Borrillo, Belhadj claimed:

> *"The Commission didn't invite us…So we demanded to be received, but they said that it was too late. I called Mrs Farida Labidi [the president of the Commission for Rights and Freedom] by telephone and we talked for half an hour. I said to her, 'There is no alternative. ATFD is not an unknown association. We did a lot for this country and we have a lot to do and to say for this Constitution. So you are duty-bound to hear us'. We also met the President of the Assembly, other deputies of political parties, Merzouki, Ben Jaafar and others"* (Borrillo 2019:63).

Belhadj's outreach to Labidi (a member of Ennahda) demonstrates ATFD's commitment to bridging divides, culminating in the Commission receiving Belhadj, Ben Achour, and former ATFD President Hedia Jrad as an official ATFD delegation (Ibid:62). Further, the additional efforts outlined above highlight the WSECoP's members' vital contribution to public advocacy, cross-party dialogue, and knowledge exchange, ensuring women's security was embedded in the drafting process. Such engagement exemplifies how this epistemic CoP functioned in Tunisia: by directly engaging policymakers and ensuring its expert knowledge shaped decision-making. This also complicates narrower framings of these organisations. For instance, Ghali (2021) characterises them as "associations… which played a crucial role in the democratic transformation process", citing their mobilisation and organisation of debates around women's rights (Ibid:14). Whilst not inaccurate, this underplays their epistemic role. As demonstrated, these organisations displayed core epistemic communities traits: deploying expert legal knowledge strategically, shaping constitutional provisions with technical precision, and influencing political actors directly – transcending the traditional role of civil society groups to co-construct Tunisia's governance architecture.

To trace this influence further, I examined the Arabic-language minutes of the Commission's proceedings between February and December 2012, published by the NCA. As per Laabidi's presentation of the report of the Commission in August 2012, the Commission held 69 working sessions over 252 working hours, with 25 of them allocated to associations and national and international organisations (NCA 2012:248). Belhadj, Ben Achour, and Jrad were heard during a working session on women's issues on 18 July 2012 (Ibid:251), following which four working groups finalised the 28 chapters of the first draft constitution, released on 08 August 2012 (Ibid:248). In her address, Laabidi affirmed that "from the beginning, the Commission members emphasised that…we want a constitution that represents most Tunisians…is consistent with the constants of Arab-Islamic identity…guarantees the achievement of the goals of 2011…guarantees the effective role of civil society as a balancing force and a real guarantee to prevent tyranny" (Ibid, translation mine).

Examining the same document, it is clear that during the July session, the ATFD delegation voiced several concerns regarding women's security. One key issue was the inclusion of gender parity in the constitution, In response, Lubna Al-Jaribi, head of the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties party's electoral list at the time, stated:

> *"As for women's rights, and I cannot help but answer this, articles have been proposed by the Commission on parity and equality, which are constitutional articles, and here I call on the women's groups in this parliament to ensure parity as the state seeks to implement the principle of parity between women and men"* (Ibid:239, translation mine).

Similar agreeable statements came from Hisham Husni of the '*Parti de Lutte Progressiste'*. During discussions on Article 28 between civil society and parliamentarians,[17] he demanded "*that the Article explicitly stipulate complete equality between the sexes as stated in Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*" (Ibid:266, translation mine).

Finally, during the Commission's debate on GBV, Belhadj is quoted as stating: *"it is critical to address the issue of violence against women with clear and decisive state policies"* (Ibid:270). This topic united both secularists and certain Islamists, with the *Nahdawia* Baya Al-Hawady affirming in response:

> *"I value in this draft the new rights related to physical sanctity represented in preventing physical and moral torture…as well as what is stated in Article 37 about eliminating violence against women, which is a characteristic distinguishing this constitution that came after the revolution"* (Ibid:276, translation mine).

[17] This is the article entitled 'Women's Rights', which was translated in the August 2012 Constitution as stating that women's roles in the family were "complementary" to men's. The text of Article 28 was as follows: "The State assures the protection of the rights of the woman, as partner of the man in the development of the nation and in accordance with gender complementarity in the family. The State guarantees equal opportunities for women in all citizens' duties. The State guarantees the fight against violence on women, whatever their nature".

This association by Ennahda representatives of GBV with physical (i.e. visible) forms of violence in the Constitution – although reflective of the consensus on the need to eliminate GBV as well as the broader negotiation strategies followed by members of the WSECoP, transcending ideological divides in order to prioritise women's security – is also consistent with Belhadj's firsthand account of the discussions in the Commission, which she narrated as follows in conversation with Sara Borrillo in 2016:[18]

> *"We said that complementarity would have led to a lot of risks for the protection of women's rights, because, from a juridical point of view, the term is in itself ambiguous…The women of Ennahda were in favour of gender equality in the public sphere…On the contrary, they rejected equality in the family"* (Borrillo 2019:64).

Thinking back to Chapter 3's discussion of the Foucauldian rationales of governmentality shaping women's security under Ben Ali, in the absence of Benalism's disciplinary power, what discernibly unfolded was a pluralisation of women's roles and representations. The uprising exposed the myth of a singular *'Femme Tunisienne'*, revealing instead multiple, divergent lived realities, amongst them Islamist women who, whilst embodying previously marginalised femininities, challenged Ben Ali's modernist state feminist ideal in ways distinct from their secular peers (Debuysere 2017:145). These developments reconfigured women's security in Tunisia, embedding it within multi-level power struggles acting through novel social relations, rather than apart from them. As Ennahda floated 'complementarity' as a vague legal principle, the 2012 Commission proceedings laid bare a clear rift between secular and Islamist women regarding the concepts of equality and complementarity (Borrillo 2019:64).

[18] Note that this view on Ennahda's attitude towards women was also the one maintained by Ben Jemia during our interview, which I discuss in this section above.

Whilst there was relative secularist-Islamist consensus on protecting women's public roles, major contention centred on the private sphere. Discussions indicate that Ennahda women MPs generally upheld traditional gendered division of labour, rejecting full equality within the family (Ibid). Many also invoked the 'cultural specificities' argument to criticise documents such as the Universal Declaration as "a Western import whose clauses are not suited to Muslim Tunisian society…Arab and Muslim cultural values are different from Western ones regarding gender equality issues" (Kammoun 2015:125). At the NCA, *Nahdawia* Aicha Dhaouadi also expressed the party's support for women's participation in political decision-making, whilst reaffirming traditional family roles:

> *"I have a message to Tunisian women. I want to reassure them that in the field, in the factory, and in every place where women have proven their worth, that they will not back down from their gains…I do not find in Tunisia, unfortunately, a balance between women's scientific and technical competence and their holding of decision-making positions at the political and economic levels…It is one of their rights in a country in which women are behind the success of the family and children…The successful woman is one who strives to death to care for her family and its success"* (NCA 2012:269, translation mine).

Comparably, Ennahda deputy Mohamed Al-Sgheer stated:

> *I hope that we put an end to the bidding between us on the issue of women, whom we want to enjoy their full freedom and not be in conflict with men, but rather they are two complementary parties with the same rights and duties…We should know that the Tunisian women is not Swedish or French. The Tunisian woman has her own personality, modesty, struggle, and morals. We should not go too far because in Tunisia we will continue to preserve our family in the same way our elders taught us…whose belonging to a Muslim environment we must support"* (Ibid:325, translation mine).

In light of such discussions, on 15 August 2012, ATFD, AFTURD, and LTDH organised a public 'meeting-debate', titled 'Critical Readings on the Draft of the Commission for Rights and Freedoms', attended by NCA deputies at Tunis' Novotel Hotel. According to the French-language Facebook event page, the aim was to "become familiar with the first version of the constitutional text and discuss its substance…What rights and freedoms have been enshrined…What status has been recognised for women? Are they full citizens, benefiting from equal rights and opportunities with men?" (ATFD, AFTURD, LTDH 2012, translation mine). Although the debate's content was not widely publicised, the Facebook invitation was shared by 364 individuals, indicating at the very least a positive showing.

This initiative illustrates how the WSECoP challenged the limitations of the state's evolving framework for women's security through civic engagement and expert critique. In contrast to authors such as Charrad and Zarrugh (2014), who describe these actors simply as part of "a dynamic and emergent civil society" (Charrad & Zarrugh 2014:236) that influenced "the tenor of debates around gender politics in the country" (Ibid), the activities described above exemplify them as epistemic communities engaged in an epistemic CoP. Key characteristics of such communities include "a shared set of normative and principled beliefs which provide a valuebased rationale for the social action of community members" (Smirnova and Yachin 2015:646) and a provision of "consensual knowledge to frame the terms of the policy debate" (Ibid), evident in the WSECoP's use of expert knowledge to critique constitutional drafts and its role in connecting local advocacy with national policymaking – both of which reflected its ability to set the terms of, as opposed to solely influence, the gender debate in Tunisia. Moreover, its efforts to ensure the articulation of comprehensive and unequivocal women's rights in the constitutional text reflects the WSECoP's "common policy enterprise" (Ibid), alongside its role in advancing systemic change through the strategic application of expert knowledge. These civic engagement efforts would soon be accompanied by more confrontational tactics, including street protests, as the next section will explore.

Before turning to this discussion however, it is important to examine the civic engagement and knowledge exchange efforts practiced by one of the WSECoP's newer members – Aswat Nissa – whose activities exemplify its function as guardian of Tunisia's democratic constitutional spirit in service of women's security. According to *Inclusive Security's* research report, Aswat Nissa played a key role in empowering women in the NCA by providing training on politics and governance fundamentals, recognising capacity building as central for advancing women's security and reframing women as capable political actors (Inclusive Security 2018:41). Information published by Aswat Nissa reveals that this culminated in *'Le École Politique Des Femmes Candidates'* in 2012, a political academy for women NCA candidates discussed again in Chapter 8, which provided throughout 2012 and 2013 capability training programmes for 25 women candidates from diverse political backgrounds on media relations; public speaking; good governance and electoral transparency; gender awareness; and budget and financing (Aswat Nissa 2012). Women lawyers in Aswat Nissa also used the NCA's need for legal assistance to advocate for certain provisions. As legal scholar Salsabil Klibi recalled in conversation with *Inclusive Security* in 2016, *"Some deputies would call us for legal advice, so we would use that opportunity to present our recommendations. For example, the article on freedom of conscience – [assembly members] were okay with freedom of religion, but not freedom of conscience, and we persuaded them to adopt it"* (Inclusive Security 2018:41). In order to further influence drafting, Aswat Nissa sent chapter-by-chapter commentary to NCA members as each constitutional draft was released, as well as crafted precise legal provisions related to women's rights and liberties, aiming to minimise interpretative flexibility for judges (Ibid:42). Evidently, these efforts illustrate how the WSECoP functioned as a supporter of democratic accountability by leveraging specialised knowledge to ensure clarity and robustness in constitutional provisions. Beyond knowledge production, Aswat Nissa also fostered informal links between decision-makers and advocates. This intermediary role aligns with the epistemic communities literature, which emphasises consensus-building amongst stakeholders, facilitating alignment on complex governance issues (Smirnova and Yachin 2015:647). By providing expert advice whilst bridging gaps between diverse actors, Aswat Nissa amplified their influence on

the constitutional drafting process, ensuring women's security was embedded within the legal structure of the new Tunisia.

6.3.2 Keeping the Constitutional Process Accountable

This section illustrates how the WSECoP acted as a watchdog over Tunisia's postuprising constitutional process, promoting accountability throughout its development.
This role was primarily exercised through protests and demonstrations maintaining pressure on political actors, alongside the advancement of transparency through vigilant monitoring and oversight.

Authors such as Charrad and Zarrugh (2014) and Grami (2018) depict the Tunisian women's organisations as civil society members. Keeping these authors on classification, I also add here the epistemic CoPs lens, which clarifies precisely how these CSOs exercised influence, as civil society groups that also performed epistemic functions largely overlooked in the literature. By generating specialised knowledge, fostering dialogue on constitutional principles, and acting as crucial intermediaries, protest and monitoring were nested within a knowledge strategy aimed at co-producing institutional solutions. This epistemic role not only deepened their impact, but also solidified their position as critical agents of accountability during the constitutional process.

In what follows, I primarily focus on two emblematic episodes: 1) the 2012 draft's Article 28 "complementarity" clause and 2) mobilisation around Article 46 of the 2014 Constitution on gender parity. By "complementarity", I refer to the August 2012 draft's Article 28, which framed women as "complementary" to men – particularly within the family – rather than equal citizens, a formulation read as legitimising rolebased hierarchy in private law. By "Article 46", I refer to the 2014 Constitution's women's-rights article, which commits the state to protect and advance women's acquired rights, guarantee equal opportunities, take measures to eliminate violence against women, and – crucially in 46.3 – seek gender parity in elected councils. These cases are selected because they bookend the core cleavage over women's status –

private-sphere hierarchy versus public-sphere equality – whilst yielding clear, traceable outcomes: the deletion of “complementarity” from subsequent drafts and the constitutionalising of parity. They also concentrate the WSECoP’s dual *modus operandi*: expert knowledge production and brokerage (drafting alternative language, curating comparative references, briefing deputies), paired with public accountability tactics (press conferences, coalitional protest, and real-time monitoring). Finally, both episodes are well-documented in Arabic NCA minutes and interview testimony, allowing process-tracing of how these CSOs, operating with epistemic capacities, converted advocacy into institutional change in ways directly tied to women’s security.

The Complementarity Debate

One of the most prominent examples of this accountability role was the debate surrounding the concept of ‘complementarity’ in the draft constitution. Whilst interviewing Arfaoui, she explained that most Ennahda members maintained that whilst men and women were equal before God, they held distinct societal roles, particularly within the family (Interview, 04 November 2024). Arfaoui revealed how this transpired within the NCA, claiming that some *Nahdaouis* emphasised women’s privileged status in Shar’ia, which referenced guidelines on women’s treatment by men (Ibid). My review of the NCA transcripts brought these perspectives into focus. For example, Ennahda member Ahmed Al-Sam’i declared:

> *“The word ‘complementarity’ captures the essence of marriage… Abolishing this word means abolishing marriage, which is what certain philosophers and feminists are trying to achieve here. In some European countries now…millions of children are born outside of marriage. If we want our society to follow this path, then let us say so, but if we want to preserve the family and its value as ascribed by our religion, we should include this in the Constitution”* (NCA 2012:148, translation mine).

A similar sentiment was shared by *Nahdawia* Zahra Samida during the same debate:

> *"What do we want? We want to establish a democratic republican system that…sanctifies the values of the family, considering the family as the central nucleus of society and considering the relationship between women and men based on complementarity in roles and compassion in relationships"* (Ibid:135, translation mine).

Contrastingly, members of other political parties, such as Lobna Jribi, an NCA representative of social democratic Ettakatol (November 2011 – December 2014) and former Minister for National Projects (February – September 2020), contributed as follows to this debate:

> *"We can say that the Article on women's rights is really far from the expectations of Tunisian women…Most parties represented here stipulated equality between women and men and respect for the Personal Status Code…Either we respect the principle and what we promised in our electoral campaigns and stipulate these principles clearly and explicitly, or we apologise to Tunisians and admit we have backed down…The revolution brought the new gain of parity for women, and it would have been more appropriate to guarantee this right as an end that the state seeks, similar to the Moroccan constitution… I suggest that we stipulate it [equality] clearly and precisely. It does not have the meaning of 'different responsibilities in different fields'. Equality has a real legal meaning and usefulness…I call on this council to agree on an Article that guarantees the reality of women's gains and guarantees equality"* (Ibid:272, translation mine).

Outside the NCA debates, prominent lawyer Radhia Nasraoui, known for defending imprisoned Islamists under Ben Ali, stated in a 2012 interview with Tunisian channel 'Hannibal': "Islamists were never happy with the content of the Code of Personal Status. They have made this point very clear during Ben Ali's regime. We were looking forward to improving the content of the Act and not to see its content contested instead" (Al Jazeera 2012). Defenders of the Article subsequently blamed the discontent on mistranslation and misinterpretation (Petkanas 2018:148). For

example, Laabidi argued critics isolated 'complementarity' from its wider context by ignoring Article 2's guarantee of equality between all citizens (Ibid:149); and Labidi claimed to have said at the NCA: *"This sentence may have a sense and meaning in the article speaking about family, but if you put it in the article about women's rights, then it adds nothing. It is just literature and what kind of legal or traditional impact might it have? It might even be dangerous"* (Ibid:150).

Beyond semantics, this debate in any case exposed profound ideological divides within Tunisian society. As Grami discerned, "this binary revealed two frames of reference for women in Tunisia – one a push toward full and legal equality between men and women, and another that sought to establish a softened moral agenda of instituting difference" (Grami 2018:42). For many liberal women, the inclusion of complementarity in the first draft reinforced their fears that, despite its assertions to the contrary, Ennahda aimed to undermine the hard-won advancements in women's rights across the past two decades (Ibid). This was not merely a symbolic rights dispute – complementarity threatened to erode women's security in its most basic sense, namely their protection from subordination in family law, their equal access to resources, and their recognition as full political subjects. From a human security perspective, these risks also extended beyond legal status to the everyday vulnerabilities women might face in their homes, workplaces, and communities (Cook 2020).

Additionally, for many political parties, women's issues were deprioritised. Ben Achour recalled being told by a male deputy during ATFD's NCA working session that *"this is not the time to talk about women's rights – we have to talk about freedom of speech, etc. That is more important"* (Inclusive Security 2018:42). However – a lawyer by training – she countered, *"it is very important to have things constitutionalised because [although] they say it's only paper…law has an operational force, which is really important"* (Ibid:43). Accordingly, the position of ATFD was as follows, as one activist told *The Washington Post* in August 2012: *"Even if the constitutional drafters' intention was good, and God only knows if it is, we still can't accept the text. The fact is, this text demeans women and makes them*

unequal or incomplete without men" (Ibid). By the same token, media reporting from the time revealed that UGTT and LTDH issued the following statement on complementarity:

> *"This position threatens and undermines the achievements of women and could create a patriarchal system that gives all power to the men and denies women their rights…This position will deny women their full citizenship and independence as human beings, as equals of men whose duty is to enjoy their human rights just like men"* (Al Jazeera 2012).

Grami (2018) also acknowledges that these organisations "held political actors accountable for any regression or cancellation of rights that women have hitherto enjoyed" (Grami 2018:41), deploying a politics-of-accountability frame that foregrounds contentious action and agenda defence (Ibid:41–42). That reading is accurate as far as it goes, and I retain it. My contribution is to layer an epistemic CoP lens on top of that civil-society classification to explain how these CSOs translated contention into institutional change, through a coordinated knowledge strategy oriented to co-designing institutional outcomes.

Indeed, "the reaction of civil society was swift and fierce" (Petkanas 2018:148), with ATFD largely at the forefront. This mobilisation reflects how epistemic communities can act as accountability watchdogs, translating democratic aspirations into legislative outcomes. As Ben Jemia recalled, ATFD mobilised civil society in a massive demonstration in Tunis against complementarity on 13 August 2012, coordinated through the newly formed *'Hrayer Tounes'* (Free Women of Tunisia) coalition – an alliance between ATFD, AFTURD, UNFT, LTDH, and UGTT and liberal political parties Ettakatol and Nidaa Tounes (Interview, 20 October 2024).

Alongside representing a united civil society front, the *Hrayer Tounes* coalition revealed the WSECoP as an epistemic CoP by synthesising expertise across its diverse members and deploying it to articulate a clear and cohesive critique of complementarity. Moreover, *Hrayer Tounes* functioned as an intermediary between

the public and the NCA, facilitating consensus-building by amplifying citizen voices and bridging the gap between grassroots mobilisation and institutional decisionmaking (Ibid). As epistemic communities literature highlights, such intermediary roles are vital in translating diverse perspectives into actionable policy frameworks, enabling alignment on contentious issues (Smirnova and Yachin 2015:647). Through knowledge production and intermediation, *Hrayer Tounes* ensured gender equality was not only defended but institutionalised within Tunisia's constitutional framework. For example, a week prior to the demonstration, *Hrayer Tounes* issued a joint communiqué, leveraging their digital networks to galvanise support (AntonakisNashif 2016:135). Three days before the event, ATFD, AFTURD, and LTDH held a joint press conference, securing additional coverage from traditional media outlets (Ibid). According to Arabic reporting by the Tunisian daily *Gnet*, Belhadj warned during the conference that *"The Draft Constitution scares us a lot. Women are not sub-citizens and have the same rights and duties of men"* (Gnet 2012, translation mine). She also revealed that the organisations had requested permission from the Interior Ministry to demonstrate on Bourguiba Avenue, but were denied. Further, LTDH President stated that *"We would've hoped that the Ministry would permit demonstrations…The Constitution being prepared does not defend freedoms but suppresses them…We will not allow any turning back"* (Ibid, translation mine). Finally, AFTURD's President Radhia Zekri lamented that *"Today, we feel that an institutionalised dictatorship is being established…Freedoms are being limited under the pretext of protecting good morals"* (Ibid, translation mine).

According to *Al Jazeera*, estimates placed the number of protestors between 5,000 and 30,000 across Tunis, as well as Sfax (Al Jazeera 2012). Media coverage of prominent protestors highlighted the involvement of Rhadia Jerbi and Wissal Jaidi from UNFT, the widows of assassinated politicians Chokri Belaïd and Mbarka Brahmi, Belhadj, and Popular Front leader Hamma Hammami (Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative 2019:8). Images published to social media platforms revealed that slogans included "No to the backsliding of women's gains in all sectors" and "The Tunisian Woman is an Equal Citizen" (Alternatif 2012), chanted by both men and women of different ages and backgrounds. Eventually, due to this demonstration

and the media debate engendered by *Hrayer Tounes*, “gender complementarity was completely eliminated from the constitutional project” (Borrillo 2019:64). The second draft (December 2012) guaranteed equal opportunities for men and women (Article 37) and affirmed legal equality (Article 5), which was later enshrined in the final constitution under Article 46.2 (Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia 2014). By defeating complementarity, the WSECoP evidently safeguarded women’s security: it ensured that constitutional text would not legitimise hierarchies that could undermine women’s bodily autonomy, legal protections, and political agency.

The WSECoP’s epistemic and civic strategic were thus pivotal in winning this battle for women, with ATFD even awarded the Simone de Beauvoir Prize for its efforts (Babnet 2012).[19] This external recognition did not reward mobilisation alone; it acknowledged knowledge-led leadership – ATFD’s ability to turn legal expertise, draft language, and boundary-spanning brokerage into concrete constitutional provisions – thereby substantiating the epistemic reading beyond what a standard civil-society lens can explain. As Ben Jemia remembered it, *“13 August 2012 was a pivotal day because Tunisians from all walks of life took to the streets. ATFD led the call to oppose the concept of complementarity, and the entire nation stood with us. Our ability to unify Tunisians is why we succeeded”* (Interview, 20 October 2024). In conversation with Sara Borrillo in 2016, Belhadj also reflected: *“We succeeded in making women’s rights a collective issue, not only one for women…We also won because our project has been clear since the very beginning…It is very radical in its understanding of patriarchy, uncompromising on gender equality…All women’s associations valued this coherence in our work…this was an asset for us”* (Borrillo 2019:65).

These efforts underscore the epistemic dimension of ATFD’s and other WSECoP members’ work, which involved not only challenging political actors but also generating evidence-based advocacy to secure for women substantive protections, bolstered by decades of knowledge exchange and expertise building. This aligns

[19] This is an international human rights prize for women’s freedom, awarded since 2008 to individuals or groups fighting for gender equality and opposing breaches of human rights.

with epistemic communities literature, which highlights their application of specialised knowledge to influence policymaking (Haas 1992; Adler & Haas 1992). By integrating such insights into the constitutional process, the WSECoP played a pivotal role in guaranteeing women's security and ensuring that democratic aspirations for inclusivity and justice were upheld.

Article 46 and Gender Parity

According to Ben Jemia, *"alongside the struggle to eradicate the language of complementarity from the final text, it was important not to forget about our important achievement of legislative gender parity"* (Interview, 20 October 2024), discussed in Chapter 5 with respect to elected assemblies. This issue was addressed by Article 46 of the final Constitution, which Petkanas argues "proved to be the most pivotal for women" (Petkanas 2018:153). Article 46.3 stated: "The State shall seek to achieve parity between women and men in elected councils" (Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia 2014), hailed by a 2014 *Atlantic Council* report as "perhaps the most progressive constitutional article regarding gender representation in the world" (Atlantic Council 2014). Nonetheless, as the same source reveals, "before the vote, a passionate debate broke out on the floor of the Assembly" (Ibid).

Debates within the NCA focused on whether parity should be enshrined in the constitution or addressed through electoral law (Inclusive Security 2018:44). One camp argued that without constitutional guarantees, Tunisia's conservative norms would hinder even the most qualified female candidates from attaining office. Opponents claimed that seat reservations would undermine women's credibility and that true authority should be earned on merit (Ibid). Others still advocated for addressing parity exclusively through electoral law, rather than embedding it in the constitution (Ibid). However, drawing upon its specialist legal and political knowledge, *Hrayer Tounes* countered firmly – "Beware, if you don't mention it in the constitution, you are going to lose it" (Ibid). Ennahda's Monia Ibrahim notably opposed the provision, arguing it violated the principle of equality (Atlantic Council

2014), and several NCA members even threatened to reject the entire constitution if Article 46.3 was included (Inclusive Security 2018:44).

Article 46.3 was nonetheless adopted with 116 votes in favour, 32 abstentions, and 40 against, with most Ennahda members voting in support (Atlantic Council 2014). Following Charrad & Zarrugh (2014), I treat organisations such as ATFD as "critical elements of civil society" that operated "within the broader structure of Tunisia's emergent political culture" (Ibid:239); the added value of the epistemic CoPs lens is to clarify how these CSOs secured the result. By strategically deploying expert legal drafting, comparative references, and targeted framing, they shaped not just discourse but institutional outcomes, securing gender parity as a constitutional principle. Here too, they advanced parity not as a matter of abstract equality, but as integral to women's security: political representation was necessary to guarantee that women could influence policies affecting their safety, livelihoods, and social freedoms. Grami (2018) likewise recognises these organisations' accountability role (Ibid:41); my contribution is to foreground the epistemic practices these CSOs mobilised within civil society – specialised expertise, transnational engagement, and boundary-spanning knowledge brokerage – that helped safeguard women's security in the new legal order.

My interview with Hmida shed light on how Article 46 ultimately passed with Ennahda's broad support. She explained that ATFD and AFTURD, alongside UNFT's President Radhia Jerbi and allies within *Hrayer Tounes*, strategically framed opposition to parity as tantamount to opposition to women's rights (Interview, 17 December 2024). This reframing exemplified the WSECoP's dual role in ensuring institutional accountability and embedding guarantees of women's security within the constitutional process, using epistemic authority to foster a political environment wherein rejecting parity appeared regressive and anti-democratic. According to Hmida, this created a narrative that *"no party would be foolish enough to oppose"* (Ibid), as doing so would risk appearing anti-women and alienating female voters. These organisations also maximised their demands during negotiations, fully aware that compromises would likely scale them back (Inclusive Security 2018:44). For

instance, Hmida shared that they were unable to gain sufficient support within the NCA to secure horizontal parity initially aimed for,[20] but their strategic emphasis on democratic modernity ensured that vertical parity was in the final text (Interview, 17 December 2024).

Despite the pluralisation of femininities that challenged Ben Ali's singular notion of 'la Femme', Hmida's revelations illuminate a critical continuity: the disciplinary power once wielded by Ben Ali was now being appropriated by Islamists and new elites. These actors instrumentalised women's security issues, not to advance gender equality, but their own political agendas. As Foucault observed, power operates not only through repression but also through production, with discourse shaping norms that regulate bodies and construct identities. The body becomes "an inscribed surface of events… a volume in perpetual disintegration" (Foucault 1977), revealing how women's roles remain sites of political contestation. My argument presented in this chapter, viewing select Tunisian women's organisations as epistemic communities and part of a WSECoP, makes visible these power dynamics. It highlights how their knowledge production and strategic advocacy not only counteract, but also expose the instrumentalization of women's security as a tool for consolidating political power. Taken together, these episodes also underscore that the battle over rights and representation was equally and profoundly a battle over women's security – who had the authority to define it, and whether the constitution would enshrine conditions necessary for women to live free from violence, exclusion, and dependency. Viewing security through a human security lens makes clear that constitutional provisions on equality were not technicalities, but structural guarantees of women's freedom from violence, exclusion, and dependency, and of their capacity to act as autonomous political subjects (Cook 2020).

[20] Progress was made on horizontal parity in June 2016, when Tunisia's parliament passed an election law for municipal and regional elections, incorporating both horizontal and vertical parity.

6.4 After State Feminism: Reconfiguring Relations in Transitional Tunisia

As the preceding discussion illustrates, for many of Tunisia's secular women's organisations, the constitution-making process was the beginning of "a more explicit state-led anti-women's rights agenda" (Grami 2018:39). Indeed, when I questioned Ben Jemia about state feminism's legacy, she lamented that "state feminism is a thing of the past" (Interview, 20 October 2024), reflecting a nostalgically idealised memory of the Benalist period – common in post-authoritarian settings, regardless of its accuracy. This sentiment merits critical examination in Tunisia's case, particularly considering its portrayal as the "Arab Spring's" sole democratic success.[21] A 2012 UNDP report on Tunisia's electoral process revealed that men from across the political spectrum – including Islamists, leftists, and secularists – attempted to marginalise women's voices, undermine their contributions, and champion political parties as exclusive domains for men (UNDP 2012:14). Grami contended in her writings that Ennahda promoted unveiled women as leaders only to prove that they "believed in women's ability and eligibility to lead and act in all fields…Ennahda women are thus not associated with spiritual but with political Islam…Religion is a political agency" (Grami 2018:39-39).[22]

For Grami, this was exemplified further when unveiled Ennahda MP Souad Abderrahim delivered a fervent denunciation of liberal secular feminists for advocating protections for single mothers during NCA debates (Ibid:39), claiming that they were "a disgrace to Tunisian society according to Islamic teachings and should not benefit from state protection" (Kammoum 2015:128). Whilst defending the necessity of supporting their children, Abderrahim emphasised that single mothers should not enjoy the same legal standing as married women, stating "we do not want to normalise children outside marriage" (Grami 2018:39). Beyond reinforcing the multiplicity of identities and expressions concerning women that came to the fore post-Ben Ali, Abderrahim's statements reveal how the discourse in the NCA was shaped both by political authority and religious rhetoric. As recognised by

[21] See for example the 2015 article published by the BBC under the title "How Tunisia is keeping Arab Spring ideals alive" or the 2014 article published by Al-Jazeera named "Tunisia: A pioneer of Arab democracy".
[22] Amel Grami is an academic and liberal feminist activist who is a Tunisian herself, and who is also a proponent of a 'modernist Islamic feminism' to be applied in Tunisia.

Kammoum, “faith-based political discourse is a very powerful genre that contends and struggles for hegemony as language is reinforced by religion to subvert and challenge power, providing an irrefutable source of legitimacy or immunity for political actors and actions” (Ibid:130). Indeed, during my interview with UNFT’s President Radhia Jerbi, she stated that Ennahda turned a blind eye to the looting of UNFT’s offices in 2013 by extremists, alongside issuing warnings to numerous banks against working with the organisation, which the majority were unwilling to challenge (Interview, 18 September 2024). This perception of a backsliding in women’s rights

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amongst certain women’s organisations in Tunisia thus alerts us to an additional pivotal circumstance – “the supposed political enfranchisement of women was used as a progressive front, and once again a political leader tried to reserve the right to decide on women’s rights” (Grami 2018:38-39).

However, rather than framing this moment simply as the rise of ‘state-led antiwomen’s rights agendas’, I consider it more analytically productive to see it as a period in which the boundaries of permissible women’s activism were once again being reconfigured and renegotiated. This dynamic reflected both discontinuities and continuities from the Ben Ali era: the loosening of authoritarian constraints opened institutional space, but also exposed new ideological tensions and moral boundaries around issues such as family, inheritance, and public morality. The WSECoP actors then responded by leveraging their epistemic authority to safeguard the constitutional process itself, defending prior gains and attempting to embed feminist principles within Tunisia’s evolving democratic framework.

For example, in 2014, ATFD – alongside AFTURD, Aswat Nissa, LTDH, and others submitted a report to the UN, warning that “the current political discourse threatens the achievements of Tunisian women, particularly in the family sphere… the concept of equality is either replaced by the term equity, or associated with the term equity” (UN Women Tunisia 2014). Correspondingly, an “inter-association action campaign” (AFTURD 2016) was launched by AFTURD, ATFD, and LTDH in 2013, denouncing “the manoeuvres of certain extremist parties and their attempts to reverse the lifting

of reservations to CEDAW announced by the Essebsi Government in October 2011" (Ibid:6). A 2016 report published by AFTURD revealed that it spearheaded the campaign, with co-leadership with ATFD's president Salwa Kennou, focused on intensifying advocacy, training, and awareness-raising efforts around CEDAW (Ibid). Activities included producing a guide linking CEDAW articles with Tunisian law; training regional activists to defend CEDAW's principles; and organising awareness and popularisation sessions across Tunisia with a view to lending a national dimension to the campaign (Ibid:6-7). According to the AFTURD report, the results of this campaign included a widely distributed guide across nine regions in Tunisia, eventually culminating in Tunisia's withdrawal of all specific reservations to CEDAW on 23 April 2014, as the first country in the region to do so.[23] This campaign thus reflected the urgency of resisting ideological encroachments on women's rights and the WSECoP's evolving role within the post-uprising governance structure. It demonstrated how the community responded to shifting state dynamics by mobilising its epistemic capacity to safeguard legal rights and the legitimacy of the constitutional process itself. It also exemplified these organisations as an epistemic CoP. By integrating research, advocacy, and training, they showcased the distinctive practices of epistemic communities. Through the development of evidence-based guides, the training of regional activists, and nationwide awareness-raising efforts, these organisations demonstrated their capacity to generate, disseminate, and apply specialised knowledge in pursuit of systemic change. This approach moved beyond the traditional boundaries of civil society engagement, positioning them as active contributors to policy-making on women's security through the strategic application of expertise. Further, these interventions were deeply embedded in the ongoing effort to protect the constitutional gains the WSECoP had shaped. In many ways, the post-constitution period became a new battleground over the meaning and boundaries of those rights, as women's organisations sought to ensure that the language of gender equality enshrined in the text was not diluted by religiouslyjustified political rhetoric or institutional inertia.

[23] It is important to note that Tunisia nonetheless maintained a general declaration stating that the country "shall not take any organisational or legislative decision in conformity with the requirements of this Convention where such a decision would conflict with the provisions of Chapter 1 of the Tunisian Constitution" (Human Rights Watch 2014).

As a final point on this topic in this chapter, scholars such as Petkanas (2018) and Debuysere (2017) caution against overexaggerating the dichotomy between Islamism and feminism/ progressivism. As Chapters 3 and 4 also demonstrated, “secular nationalism and secular modernist regimes have historically made use of the mobilisation of women whilst simultaneously side-lining their concerns in favour of the needs of the post-colonial state and regime” (Petkanas 2018:15), a pattern epitomised by the Ben Ali era. Despite his secularism, Ben Ali failed to deliver “democracy or intersectional and fully emancipatory gender politics” (Ibid), deploying secularism to service authoritarianism instead, as underscored by Chapter 2. This

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observation emphasises that neither secularism nor Islamism inherently guarantees gender equality or progressive politics, as both can be instrumentalised to serve broader political agendas. A more nuanced analysis, as explored throughout this thesis through the epistemic CoPs framework, reveals the multifaceted ways in which women’s rights have been co-opted and contested across ideological divides.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter explored how certain women’s organisations acted as custodians of Tunisia’s constitutional process to safeguard women’s security. This was achieved through fostering civic engagement and knowledge exchange to amplify women’s voices and priorities; as well as ensuring accountability through protests, monitoring, and advocacy. The analysis highlighted the WSECoP’s methods, arguments, and impact, particularly its contributions to embedding women’s security within Tunisia’s evolving legal and political architecture.

At the heart of this chapter lies the argument that the epistemic dimensions of ATFD’s, AFTURD’s, and allied groups’ work have been under-acknowledged. Reading these organisations through an epistemic CoP lens exposes how they operated as producers, translators, and brokers of knowledge – drafting model clauses, circulating comparative legal arguments, monitoring deliberations, and packaging expertise for deputies and the public. This does not contradict their

civilsociety status; it specifies the mechanisms by which they shaped constitutional discourse and provides a richer understanding of their contributions.

The chapter's analysis employed multiple data sources – legislative documents, working papers, translated Arabic-language minutes of the NCA proceedings, historical media reports, and semi-structured interviews – with these primary sources triangulated with relevant scholarly literature to contextualise the WSECoP's interventions and frame its contributions within the broader socio-political landscape.

My findings highlighted the WSECoP's role in mobilising against regressive proposals, such as the concept of complementarity, and in advocating for gender parity, culminating in the landmark Article 46 of the 2014 Constitution. Through interideological dialogues and collaborations, the WSECoP also succeeded in uniting secular and Islamist women's groups around some shared goals, transforming feminist advocacy into a unifying force rather than a divisive issue. This approach strengthened the WSECoP's legitimacy and ensured that women's security was framed as a national priority, transcending the secular-Islamist binary.

By theorising the WSECoP as an epistemic CoP, this chapter contributes to a more nuanced understanding of feminist activism in transitional contexts. Unlike Western epistemic communities largely operating within stable political systems, the WSECoP functioned within a dynamic and contested environment, where its role as a bridgebuilder and knowledge broker was critical. This distinction underscores the adaptability of epistemic communities in responding to localised challenges, offering a valuable framework for analysing feminist movements in other post-authoritarian settings.

Chapter 7: Women's Physical Security in Focus: The WSECoP and GBV in post-2014 Tunisia

7.1 Introduction

As Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrated, post-2011 Tunisia underwent a significant transformation, transitioning from autocracy to limited democracy. My discussion of the WSECoP's influence on the uprising and constitutional process highlights its multifaceted and adaptive role in this period, continuing its mission to safeguard women's security. Building on these earlier discussions, Chapter 7 examines the WSECoP's efforts to enhance women's physical security through shared practices addressing GBV. Whilst women's organisations also tackled GBV under Ben Ali, as shown in Chapter 4, their efforts were largely confined to legal reform within authoritarian constraints. In contrast, post-2011 the WSECoP evolved into a more assertive and coordinated force, capable of shaping norms and holding institutions accountable. This chapter focuses on the post-2014 period, when the constitution had been finalised and democratic elections held, allowing the WSECoP to prioritise once again its broader social missions, involving protecting women against violence.

This chapter argues that the WSECoP's post-2014 work on GBV reflects a continued expansion of its post-2011 functions, centred around three key roles. First, the WSECoP acted as a *policy advocacy and reform facilitator*, effectively bridging grassroots activism and policymaking. Drawing on research, international frameworks, and local expertise, it successfully lobbied for transformative legislation – most notably Law No. 58-2017 (Law 58), which criminalised all forms of GBV. Through this role, the WSECoP translated constitutional principles into concrete legal protections, demonstrating its capacity to operationalise democratic values through advocacy.

Second, the WSECoP acted as a *norm entrepreneur*, working to shift societal attitudes and cultural perceptions around gender equality and violence. Its influence extended beyond formal politics to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms through awareness campaigns, community dialogues, public debates, and advocacy

addressing gendered economic marginalisation. By embedding normative change in its work, the WSECoP framed democratic consolidation as both legal reform and cultural transformation, demonstrating its ability to operate across formal and informal spheres of power.

Finally, the WSECoP served as a *mediator of international frameworks*, enhancing Tunisian women's physical security through its engagement with the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda, including Tunisia's 2018 National Action Plan on UNSC Resolution 1325. This role was evident in its interactions with the UN and other actors, as it worked to align global norms with local realities whilst resisting frameworks that overlooked Tunisia's structural and cultural specificities. In doing so, it not only advanced women's security but also showed how local, non-Western epistemic CoPs can reshape externally-imposed frameworks to better reflect indigenous needs.

In line with the literature, I consider ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa throughout as CSOs. However, I add that their influence operated on two intertwined layers that the CSO-only framing tends to miss. As CSOs, they mobilised constituencies, built coalitions, convened public fora, and sustained press on decision-makers. Concurrently, as epistemic actors, they produced and validated policy-relevant knowledge and brokered that knowledge into state channels. In short, the civilsociety layer created access and leverage, whilst the epistemic layer supplied the content, standards, and instruments through which institutions could absorb gendersensitive reforms. This dual-layer lens does not reclassify these organisations; it adds an analytic dimension clarifying *how* advocacy travelled into law and practice in the cases traced below, explaining the WSECoP's distinctive contribution to creating women's security.

Although this chapter focuses on the WSECoP's collective evolution after 2014, it also highlights the distinct epistemic roles of ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa. Each pursued independent projects affirming their capacity as self-sustaining epistemic communities – producing expert knowledge, shaping legal reforms, and engaging in

norm diffusion. However, their activities remained aligned through overlapping practices and mutual participation in broader coalitions, reinforcing the WSECoP's function as a collaborative CoP. This structure enabled both autonomy and synergy, with individual expertise feeding into collective feminist governance.

To support its arguments, this chapter draws on a rich array of primary and secondary sources. These include eight interviews with leaders from ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa, many of whom are also prominent activists and legal scholars. It also uses organisational documents, such as AFTURD's activity reports and Aswat Nissa's WPS materials, as well as archival media coverage from outlets like BBC News, Amnesty International, and the Tunisian *Kapitalis*. International policy documents, including reports from UN Women, trace the WSECoP's engagement with global frameworks. Academic literature by Tunisian and international scholars such as Larbi Sadiki, Maaike Voorhoeve, Giulia Daniele, and Valentine Moghadam, alongside theoretical insights from epistemic communities and CoPs literatures, help triangulate these findings and provide a nuanced analysis of the WSECoP's role in addressing GBV.

However, it is necessary to temper my argument by acknowledging that whilst the WSECoP's influence expanded after 2011, its impact on Tunisia's gender landscape faced notable limitations. Despite groundbreaking achievements like Law 58, persistent structural and socio-political barriers constrained its efforts. Thus, in terms of norm entrepreneurship, Chapter 7 critically presents the WSECoP as a *situated* norm entrepreneur – producing and applying feminist knowledge to push for systemic change, yet within, and limited by, enduring patriarchal structures.

These dynamics also reflect Tunisia's unique path to democratisation, showing how democratic transitions can unfold outside Western models. As discussed in Chapter 5, Sadiki's notion of "democratic knowledge" offers a useful lens to understand how Tunisia's process has drawn on distinct socio-political and cultural foundations. By centring local knowledge and practices, Tunisia's case challenges universalist, Western-centric views of democracy, revealing how diverse, locally-grounded

interpretations can emerge. This highlights the need to recognise the agency and epistemic contributions of local actors in building democratic systems that are contextually meaningful and enduring.

This chapter first examines the WSECoP's instrumental role in securing transformative legislative changes, particularly Law 58 of 2017, through both ATFD's leadership in coalition efforts and its independent work as an epistemic community. The data collection initiatives underpinning this legal reform, led by AFTURD as epistemic community in partnership with ATFD, Beity, and AFC Le Kef, is then considered. I subsequently explore AFTURD's TAMKIN and L'espace Tanassof projects, which also involved wider WSECoP members such as ATFD, illustrating how feminist organisations functioned as agents of normative change. The concluding sections assess how the WSECoP mediated international frameworks like WPS, focusing on the work of Aswat Nissa to localise global norms (Appendix Table A8 summarises these WSECoP interventions on women's physical security). Throughout, the chapter critically evaluates the WSECoP's impact, its constraints, and the legacy of Tunisia's political history.

As outlined in the Introduction, my analysis ends in 2021 due to President Kais Saied's unconstitutional 'self-coup' in July of that year. Saied suspended parliament, blocked legislative processes, and dismantled much of the democratic progress achieved since 2011 (Carnegie Endowment 2022). He centralised power, shifting Tunisia from a parliamentary to a hyper-presidential system, and rewrote the 2014 Constitution, removing gender parity provisions and threatening hard-won rights such as abortion access (The New Arab 2022). His government, dominated by loyalists, also dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council and curtailed judicial independence. Additionally, the visible political role of Saied's family, including his wife and brother, revived memories of Ben Ali–era nepotism.

This regression was not only institutional, but also personal for many of my interviewees. As Ben Jemia recounted,[24] *"the State itself is now practising violence*

[24] Monia Ben Jemia, former ATFD President (2016 – 2018), introduced in Chapter 4.

against women... many of us [ATFD members] have been arrested or are being prosecuted for exercising their rights of association or expression" (Interview, 28 October 2024). This repression extended to prominent figures such as Hmida,[25] who fled to France after a criminal investigation was launched against her and four other opposition figures, accusing them – without evidence – of "conspiracy" (Amnesty International 2023). This climate of fear and suppression underscores the fragility of Tunisia's democratic gains and highlights the urgent need to document and analyse the contributions of the WSECoP during the period of democratic hope immediately following the 2011 uprising. Chapter 7 thus serves as a testament to their resilience and a reflection on the contested nature of democracy and women's rights in Tunisia.

7.2 The WSECoP and GBV

7.2.1 The WSECoP's Policy Advocacy and Reform Facilitation

This section explores the WSECoP's key role in advancing policy advocacy and reform to combat GBV. The passage of Law 58 marked a watershed moment, signifying a substantive departure from ATFD's and AFTURD's pre-2011 efforts under Ben Ali, discussed in Chapter 4, focused predominantly on providing immediate victim support, awareness-raising, and lobbying for incremental reforms. The enactment of Law 58, by contrast, was almost entirely the result of the WSECoP's collective imagination, advocacy, and sustained effort. It constituted a transformative legal breakthrough, offering a comprehensive framework to address systemic GBV and affirming the WSECoP's status as a leading policy reform actor in post-2011 Tunisia.

Within this context, the passage of Law 58 stands as the most significant postuprising development addressing GBV in Tunisia. Its ambitious, systemic approach marked a clear break from earlier incremental reforms. Shaped almost

[25] Bochra Belhaj Hmida, the Tunisian lawyer, co-founder of ATFD, and former MEP introduced in Chapter 4.

entirely by WSECoP advocacy and reform efforts, it has thus been prioritised for detailed

examination in this section, reflecting the importance of devoting space in this thesis to analysing achievements that exemplify the WSECoP's transformative impact on Tunisia's legal and policy framework.

I note that whilst Law 58 has been celebrated in policy reports (UN Women 2017; Fondation Hirondelle 2017) and briefly discussed by scholars such as Voorhoeve (2021), no existing academic study has systematically traced the role of women's organisations in its passage, obscuring the grassroots advocacy and expert lobbying led by ATFD, AFTURD, and other WSECoP members. My analysis fills this gap by using original interviews and primary data to reconstruct the policy-making process from the perspective of the epistemic actors that shaped it, revealing Law 58 as a product of bottom-up feminist governance.

Law 58

Adopted on 26 July 2017, Tunisia's Law 58 marked a historic step in combating GBV, making Tunisia the first Arab country to enact comprehensive legislation on the issue (UN Women 2017). Rooted in over two decades of feminist advocacy, the law embraced a broad definition of violence – including physical, economic, psychological, sexual, and political forms – and aligned with international standards and Tunisia's 2014 constitutional Article 46 mandate (Ibid; Fondation Hirondelle 2017). As Jerbi explained to me,[26] the law was structured around four pillars: prevention, protection, victim support, and punishment, and significantly amended the Penal Code to criminalise previously unrecognised forms of GBV, including psychological abuse, habitual mistreatment, and female genital mutilation (Interview, 18 September 2024). It also broadened the definition of sexual violence, toughened penalties for rape and harassment, and removed impunity provisions like Article 227,

[26] Radhia Jerbi; a Tunisian lawyer and current UNFT President, introduced in Chapter 3.

which had allowed perpetrators to avoid punishment by marrying their underage victims (Voorhoeve 2021; Fondation Hirondelle 2017).

Jerbi – whose decades-long career as a human rights lawyer and direct involvement in Law 58's drafting positioned her as a key authority – also emphasised that Law 58 addressed procedural justice through innovative mechanisms, including the establishment of specialised police units for GBV – which she noted served to *"cleanse"* the police's public image after its vilification under Ben Ali's corrupt and brutal rule, as discussed in Chapter 2 – and the appointment of prosecutors trained specifically to handle GBV cases (Interview, 18 September 2024). According to the UN and Fondation Hirondelle – a Swiss media development organisation active in Tunisia since 2011, known for supporting independent journalism and public information initiatives – additional provisions included restraining orders and court requirements to create specialised reception areas for survivors (Fondation Hirondelle 2017; UN Women 2017), contributing to the law's designation as "historic" (UN Women 2017:para 1).

According to Jerbi, the law extended beyond legal reforms to promote educational and cultural change. It tasked media outlets with countering gender stereotypes and mandated public awareness campaigns to transform societal mentalities (Interview, 18 September 2024; Voorhoeve 2021). It further institutionalised state responsibility for survivor care, requiring housing, medical, and psychological support, whilst prohibiting salary discrimination and exploitative practices such as employing girls as domestic workers (Fondation Hirondelle 2017).

Evidently, Law 58 marked a watershed moment in Tunisia's legal framework, criminalising all forms of GBV and departing significantly from the incremental reforms of the Ben Ali era. It reflected a holistic vision of gender justice, dismantling patriarchal provisions like Article 227, which had allowed rapists to escape prosecution by marrying their victims – a reform unimaginable under Ben Ali's tightly controlled state feminism. Further, most importantly for this thesis, Law 58

exemplified the WSECoP's evolution from constrained legal advocacy under authoritarianism, to a self-directed epistemic CoP capable of shaping systemic reform in a democratic setting. Whereas pre-2011 efforts were fragmented and politically circumscribed, the advocacy behind Law 58 reflects a unified, strategic, and pluralistic feminist intervention into Tunisia's post-uprising legal order.

When examining the WSECoP's advocacy for Law 58, one organisation emerges as particularly pivotal – ATFD. As compellingly recounted to me by Hmida, *"ATFD was more than simply involved in passing Law 58, without us the idea for it would not have even existed. Historically, we were the first organisation to denounce violence against women in Tunisia, but also to have demanded a comprehensive law and to have even thought about it after 2011"* (Interview, 17 December 2024). Both Hmida and Arfaoui[27] similarly emphasised how the origins of the law undoubtedly lay in ATFD's decades-long lobbying against Article 227 of Tunisia's Penal Code, including *"even alerting the attention of the Ben Ali government on the issue"* (Interview, 04 November 2024), which came to a head in 2012 and 2014 following two high-profile incidents (Interview, 17 December 2024; Interview, 04 November 2024). In the first, two police officers raped 27-year-old Meriem Ben Mohamed in September 2012, later accusing her of 'indecency' for 'immodest' behaviour with her boyfriend – charges that were filed after she reported the assault (BBC News 2014; Amnesty International 2015). Second, in 2014, a Tunisian court permitted the rapist of a 13year-old pregnant girl to marry his victim (Voorhoeve 2021:384). In response, ATFD organised mass protests in Tunis in 2013 with banners reading: *"Non à l'impunité du viol"* (No to impunity for rape) and *"Article 227 bis: article de la honte"* (Article 227 bis: article of shame) (Ibid). Protest leader and ATFD member, Souha Ben Othman, warned in an interview with academic Giulia Daniele:

> *"After the revolution, the majority of women's rights…have been put in danger. Today we risk our rights, our Constitution…women's rights are questioned by both legislative tools and political practices. Today, Tunisian women are afraid*

[27] Khedija Arfaoui, the Tunisian activist, academic, and ATFD member introduced in Chapter 5.

of going out…we do not know what could happen in the street" (Daniele 2014:21).

ATFD was thus undoubtedly a key actor in Tunisian civil society, as noted by Voorhoeve (2021:384), but as this section reveals, it also functioned as an epistemic community and core WSECoP member. This distinction matters: viewing ATFD through an epistemic lens underscores its role not only in advocacy, but in generating specialised knowledge on GBV, highlighting how its knowledge production and strategic engagement facilitated systemic change, particularly by reframing GBV as a societal and legislative priority. Through decades of documenting GBV cases and building alliances with jurists, legal scholars, and activists, ATFD accumulated a body of applied legal knowledge positioning it as a key knowledge broker in Tunisia's legal reform landscape. It also highlights the evolution of ATFD after Ben Ali, reflecting strategic recalibration from constrained advocacy under authoritarianism to a more assertive role as a constitutional actor, legislative drafter, and coalition-builder in the democratic transition, thereby consolidating its epistemic authority in shaping women's security agendas.

ATFD funded Ben Mohamed's legal representation, securing the conviction of the policemen in March 2014 (FIDH 2014). It then convened a national workshop on rape in May 2014 and launched a '2015–17 Action Plan on Violence Against Women', gathering representatives from its branches in six Tunisian cities, the LTDH, and the International Federation for Human Rights' (FIDH) Tunis office (FIDH 2014; Arfaoui and Moghadam 2016:644). This underscores ATFD's epistemic function in aligning diverse actors through expert knowledge to convert grassroots concerns into actionable policy, in this way also fulfilling its reform facilitator role. Following further interventions by ATFD, LTDH, and FIDH, the policemen's sentences were extended to 15 years in November 2014 (FIDH 2014). Between November and December 2014, these organisations also participated in a 16-day anti-GBV campaign spearheaded by ATFD, under the slogans *"Raped and Accused"* and *"Behind every abused woman, there is a law"* (Amnesty International 2015:4),

calling upon the state “to harmonise its national legislation with its international commitments and adopt a comprehensive law for all forms of violence and discrimination against women” (FIDH 2014:para 3). These actions reflect how epistemic communities leverage expertise to drive advocacy campaigns and influence legislative frameworks, transcending the traditional boundaries of CSOs (IJSSH 2015:96). In the context of Tunisia’s international commitments, by framing legislative gaps, these organisations invoked specialised knowledge to align national policy with global norms.

My conversation with Ben Jemia revealed another key ATFD-led initiative that influenced Law 58. As ATFD’s President during the year it was passed, she could provide pivotal and unique insights into its formation, as well as ATFD’s decisive role. She explained that, as early as 2014, *“we created a coalition for the adoption of a comprehensive law against violence, which brought together nearly 60 associations…members from AFTURD, CREDIF, UNFT, Beity, LTDH, LET, amongst others, as well as UN Women”* (Interview, 28 October 2024). The interview further uncovered that expert groups were then formed from coalition members, tasked with drafting preliminary texts and engaging in consultations with officials and parliamentary committees, headed by ATFD’s Sana Ben Achour (Ibid). These processes exemplify hallmark epistemic communities practices – convening diverse expertise and providing evidence-based recommendations to inform governance. Beyond ATFD-specific activities, the broader coalition also operated as an epistemic CoP, integrating knowledge production and policy influence. It did so by creating horizontal spaces of exchange between organisations with different disciplinary backgrounds, coordinating collective learning through shared legal drafts and research, and embedding this expertise in direct dialogues with parliamentary commissions and ministries. In this way, the coalition not only produced new legal knowledge on GBV but also translated it into actionable policy proposals, reinforcing both its internal epistemic cohesion and its external political leverage. This formation of expert groups, engagement with international frameworks, and use of empirical data to influence Tunisia’s legislative landscape evidenced a dual role: fostering internal knowledge-sharing and learning amongst feminist actors to function as

reform facilitators, whilst simultaneously advocating for systemic legal reforms at the national level.

Drafts of Law 58 were thusly prepared by expert groups, including Ben Jemia and Jerbi from UNFT, who contributed key provisions on victim protection, care and prosecution, most of which were *"maintained and passed by parliament, with few amendments"* (Ibid). Drawing on her background as a law professor at the University of Carthage, Ben Jemia personally engaged in consultations with government officials and parliamentary committees to shape the law's final form (Ibid). Furthermore, she importantly revealed that CREDIF played a crucial role in bolstering the case for Law 58,[28] particularly its studies on GBV's socio-economic impacts, as they were produced by a government-aligned institution (Ibid). CREDIF data was thus frequently cited in ATFD-facilitated workshops and policy dialogues, strengthening its arguments for systemic reform (Ibid). This use of CREDIF data arguably highlights a defining feature of epistemic communities: their ability to ground advocacy in rigorous, evidence-based research (IJSSH 2015:96), enhanced the credibility of reform agendas.

Nonetheless, Ben Jemia also emphasised that the coalition had to navigate a complex political terrain marked by logistical hurdles and ideological opposition, reflecting evolving secular-Islamist tensions, a dynamic explored throughout this thesis. She explained that the expert group's initial draft of Law 58 included a prevention section mandating the reform of all discriminatory laws and CSP, which was rejected by the Ennahda-majority government. This necessitated a revised draft led by Yosra Frawes that removed the contested provision (Ibid).[29] This episode illustrates how ATFD and coalition members operated as a WSECoP, strategically adapting their advocacy to advance policy goals within a polarised landscape. By reframing their proposals to appeal across ideological divides, engaging in evidencebased lobbying, and leveraging CREDIF's empirical studies, they influenced legal reform through knowledge-driven advocacy – defining traits of an epistemic

[28] CREDIF is the 'Centre for Research, Documentation and Information on Women' discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Post-2011, CREDIF remained a governmental institution functioning under MAFFEPA. However, it now retained operational independence, largely functioning as a research hub producing data-driven insights on gender issues, often leveraged by civil society.
[29] Frawes is a Tunisian lawyer and ATFD activist who served as President of ATFD between 2018 and 2021.

CoP. This lens also highlights how these organisations exceeded the analytical boundaries of civil society labels. Whilst Martin (2020:75) classifies some

abovementioned coalition members – LTDH, ATFD, and UGTT – as "legal CSOs" (Martin 2020:75), their sustained engagement in research, legislative drafting, and coalition-building also underscores an epistemic CoP intertwining knowledge production and policy influence, thereby exceeding the conventional scope of CSOs.

Ben Jemia indicated that the rejection of CSP reforms stemmed from Islamist influence, a view she also shared with legal anthropologist Maaike Voorhoeve in 2017, declaring "*the project was attacked by the Islamists and the ministry of Religious Affairs"* (Voorhoeve 2021:386). Voorhoeve further observed that certain additional elements of the proposed reforms were diluted due to conservative resistance – for instance, debates over the term 'gender' and adolescent sexual relations triggered pushback from Islamist MPs, leading to culturally palatable compromises (Ibid). Nonetheless, having managed to repeal the Penal Code's "marry your rapist" provision, radicalise perceptions of GBV, and establish monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, ATFD and the coalition members accepted the draft to ensure progress, whilst continuing the lobby for more robust protections (Interview, 28 October 2024; Nawaat 2018). Drawing on epistemic communities theory outlined in Chapter 1, we are reminded of how epistemic communities sometimes strategically balance short-term concessions with long-term goals, to maintain broader systemic reform. Moreover, as Voorhoeve highlights, there was still "a large amount of overlap between the intentions of Islamist and non-Islamist factions" (Voorhoeve 2021:392). For example, Ennahda leader Rachid Ghannouchi emphasised that protecting women aligns with Islamic teachings advocating "good treatment of women" (Ibid:387), and non-Islamist actors, including the Parliamentary Commission on Rights and Liberties, highlighted the law's compatibility with both human rights and Islamic principles. This pragmatic invocation of religious values reflects Chapter 6's insight that Islamism and feminism in Tunisia often intersect more fluidly than polarised narratives suggest.

Data Collection on GBV

The WSECoP's role as a policy advocacy and reform facilitator was further demonstrated through its collaborative GBV data collection initiative. Launched in 2014, the project was led by AFTURD in partnership with fellow WSECoP members ATFD, Beity, and AFC Le Kef, as well as the Danish NGO Danner (AFTURD 2016:20). As my analysis of project files published by AFTURD in 2016 revealed, through systematically collecting and analysing gender-disaggregated data, these organisations not only established an evidence base for policy advocacy, but also actively reframed national discourse on women's physical security (Ibid).

Before examining the GBV data collection project, it is essential to consider what this initiative reveals about the organisation's evolving role. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, AFTURD was known during the Ben Ali era for its feminist research, transnational collaboration, and documenting women's legal, social, and economic conditions. AFTURD had also been occupied with using evidence-based research to challenge the Benalist state's top-down vision of 'Tunisianité'. However, Tunisia's political opening created new avenues CSOs to engage in direct policy advocacy, institutional reform, and grassroots mobilisation. Whilst AFTURD retained its *raison d'être* as a feminist knowledge producer, it increasingly positioned itself as a key policy actor engaging in coalition-building, legislative lobbying, and embedding feminist knowledge within state frameworks. This shift reflects the WSECoP's broader role as a policy advocacy and reform facilitator and exemplifies how AFTURD, as an epistemic community, responded to decision-making contexts marked by complexity and uncertainty (Dunlop 2011:2).

During my second discussion with Mahfoudh –[30] who, as a leading scholar on Tunisian women, was frequently invited to consult on AFTURD's projects – she recounted being contacted by AFTURD in early 2014, after the organisation identified a lack of standardised data on GBV in Tunisia (Interview, 18 December 2024). AFTURD President Salwa Kennou informed her that the Danish NGO Danner

[30] Amel Mahfoudh, the Tunisian gender academic introduced in Chapter 5.

had agreed to support a national data collection programme documenting the prevalence, nature, and impact of GBV, recognising that evidence-based policy

required robust statistical and qualitative data (Ibid). Mahfoudh revealed that Kennou's hope for the programme was that it would not only support advocacy, but *"institutionalise a gender-sensitive approach to data collection within Tunisia's policy landscape"* (Ibid). This reinforces the WSECoP's role in transforming legislative frameworks through empirical research. The programme also underscores observations by Sebenius (1992) and Dunlop (2000), discussed in Chapter 1, that epistemic communities are often political actors, engaged in strategic bargaining to shape outcomes.

According to AFTURD's project materials, in the initial phases, AFTURD coordinated the identification of key organisations with expertise in violence prevention, shelter services, and legal advocacy, leading to the inclusion of ATFD, Beity, and AFC Le Kef (AFTURD 2016:20). The project's primary goal was to integrate gender-sensitive indicators into data-gathering processes, addressing long-standing gaps in official statistics. The WSECoP members thus co-developed a standardised data toolkit – comprising survey instruments, reporting templates, and fieldworker training modules (Ibid). To refine these tools, AFTURD's evaluation of the project revealed that

AFTURD and ATFD hosted a seminar series *"Data Collection on Violence Against Women: Comparative Experiences"* between June and December 2014, discussing local and international best practices (Ibid:22). The final outcome was a unified questionnaire, ensuring consistency in data reporting across different organisations (Ibid). This collaboration illustrates the existence of a knowledge-producing and policy-shaping WSECoP. By aligning their efforts, these WSECoP members not only shared expertise, but attempted to embed gender-sensitive practices into Tunisia's policy frameworks, demonstrating CoP processes of norm diffusion and policy learning (Ibid).

AFTURD's project materials also reveal that, alongside data collection, the WSECoP organisations ran public advocacy campaigns to promote evidence-based

policymaking (AFTURD 2016:23). To this end, in 2014 and 2015 ATFD and Beity coordinated two nationwide campaigns featuring media outreach, expert panels, and stakeholder dialogues aimed at fostering institutional buy-in for data-driven policy approaches (Ibid). Notably, AFTURD additionally leveraged research findings to initiate high-level policy dialogues with Tunisia's Ministry of Women, Family, and Children, and the National Office for Family and Population (ONFP). A landmark outcome was a December 2014 partnership agreement between AFTURD and the ONFP, which formalised collaboration between psychologists in regional ONFP delegations and civil society actors, integrating standardised data practices into Tunisia's welfare infrastructure (Ibid). These developments support Antoniades' view that epistemic communities do not operate in isolation, but are integral to multilevel negotiations, where their expertise is leveraged within broader governance structures (Antoniades 2003:32).

According to Mahfoudh, the impact of the data collection project was multifaceted. Following our interview, she shared that the two abovementioned national surveys completed as part of the project each documented the experiences of 200 and 150 women survivors of violence, respectively (Interview, 18 December 2024). These findings were arguably more than research outputs – they were embedded in the WSECoP's broader strategy of feminist knowledge-production intersecting with advocacy to achieve policy change. Researchers from AFTURD and ATFD compiled the results into detailed reports covering violence types, perpetrator profiles, and institutional responses (Ibid). According to the project materials published by AFTURD, these reports were not only instrumental in raising awareness, but also played a direct role in shaping Tunisia's legislative approach to GBV (AFTURD 2016:24). Most notably, the data influenced the drafting of Law 58, particularly its provisions on specialised police units, emergency protection orders, and survivor services. ATFD also used the findings as key lobbying tools (Ibid). It was further discerned from AFTURD's programme evaluation that the WSECoP's involvement in data collection led to tangible structural changes within Tunisia's GBV response mechanisms, including the creation of 130 mobile police and National Guard units tasked with monitoring and responding to GBV cases by 2021, with 40% to be led by

women (Ibid). These reforms reflect the institutionalisation of gender-sensitive security policies, a key outcome of the WSECoP's policy advocacy and reform facilitation functions. Its systematic approach to data collection, training, policy advocacy, and institutional reform also exemplifies my epistemic CoP model, where technical knowledge production, dissemination, and framing of complex issues in governance processes distinguishes the WSECoP from traditional civil society actors.

7.2.2 The WSECoP as a Norm Entrepreneur

This section focuses on the WSECoP's role as a norm entrepreneur, reshaping societal and institutional norms to prioritise women's security. This is illustrated through two key women's centres: Tamkin Space for Accommodation and Empowerment of Women Victims of Violence (TAMKIN) and L'espace Tanassof (Tanassof), [31] led by AFTURD in collaboration with ATFD, Beity, and AFC Le Kef.

Although ATFD and AFTURD reports document the creation and operation of TAMKIN and Tanassof, these centres have not received lacademic attention, let alone through the lens of epistemic CoPs. This section draws on original interviews and internal documents to show how these centres acted as vehicles of normative transformation, expanding the organisations' influence from legal advocacy to broader social change. My contribution here is thus both empirical and conceptual: I bring new data into the conversation, whilst also demonstrating how these initiatives were acts of norm entrepreneurship and knowledge production in transitional governance. Specifically, they sought to unsettle entrenched norms that treated GBV as a private matter, minimised survivors' agency, and normalised women's dependence, and to replace them with new norms framing GBV as a public concern warranting institutional response, women as autonomous actors, and empowerment as a societal value (AFTURD 2016; ATFD 2019). These spaces thus represented more than service provision, acting as catalysts for broader cultural and political transformations.

[31] 'Tamkin' is the Arabic word for 'Empowerment'. 'Tanassof' is the Arabic word for 'Conflict'.

The decision to focus on TAMKIN and Tanassof is twofold. First, these centres highlight AFTURD's evolution from a research-based organisation under Ben Ali to an active provider of services and policy advocacy, embedding feminist principles within state-supported structures. Second, they exemplify how these epistemic communities were engaged in a CoP, catalysed by their joint efforts and shared practices in response to real-world challenges (Bicchi 2023:3). They embodied Adler's (2008) definition of CoPs as "like-minded groups of practitioners informally and contextually bound by a shared interest in learning and applying a common practice" (Adler 2008:196).

A particularly illustrative example of this dynamic is how AFTURD 'learned' from ATFD's long-standing experience with women's centres, pioneered by ATFD prior to 2011, as Chapter 4 revealed. This supports Bicchi's (2023:2) view of CoPs as shaped by "timing, placing, and sensemaking", with organisations responding to shifting political contexts through evolving practices. These organisations operated specifically as an epistemic CoP by producing and disseminating feminist knowledge, engaging state and international actors, and combining internal learning with external policy influence. TAMKIN and Tanassof, alongside advocacy and transnational collaboration, illustrate this epistemic role vividly, blending Wenger's social learning approach with Haas' policy-oriented expertise.

The norm entrepreneurship evident in TAMKIN and Tanassof reflected a strategic, collective effort to reshape societal attitudes, embed gender equity within institutional frameworks, and foster sustainable, community-driven approaches to women's security in Tunisia. At the same time, it is important to approach the WSECoP's role as a norm entrepreneur with critical nuance. Whilst centres like TAMKIN and Tanassof were envisioned as transformative spaces for shifting gender norms and institutionalising feminist values, they operated in a volatile political environment marked by patriarchal inertia and tightening restrictions on civil society. As such, the

analysis below presents WSECoP's norm entrepreneurship as *situated* – constrained by the limits of state cooperation and cultural resistance. This qualification does not diminish its significance, but rather positions it as an embedded actor.

TAMKIN and Tanassof

Launched in March 2016, TAMKIN was led by AFTURD, with major input from ATFD, Beity, and AFC Le Kef (AFTURD 2016), in collaboration with Tunisia's Ministry of Family, Women, and Children, and Seniors (MFFES; formerly MAFFEPA pre-2011), in light of Law 58's mandating of state support for access to shelters for victims.[32] This partnership marked a significant departure from the Ben Ali era, when, following Arfaoui's *"the government said there is no such thing as violence against women in Tunisia"* (Interview, 04 November 2024), and shelters like ATFD's received no formal state recognition.

TAMKIN was conceived in response to alarming GBV rates in Tunisia, with the Family Planning Office reporting in 2012 that 47% of women aged 18 to 64 had experienced physical, psychological, sexual, or economic violence, and that 53.5% of these incidents occurred in public spaces (Moghadam 2021:148; ATFD 2019). Through my email correspondence with a former AFTURD member, who preferred to remain anonymous considering AFTURD's forced closure in 2023,[33] she noted that AFTURD also launched TAMKIN due to recognising the necessity of redressing societal norms and perceptions surrounding women, aiming to help survivors reclaim their narratives, and challenge cultural framings of women solely as victims. As she recounted, TAMKIN was *"less about a battle between the sexes and more about ensuring women have the opportunities to make meaningful choices"* (Anonymous, personal communication, 14 January 2025). Conceived as more than a shelter, a

[32] MFFES was led at the time by Neziha Labidi, a physician and member of the centrist El Moubadra party. El Moubadra was a centrist political party which was part of the ruling coalition government at the time, alongside Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda. It had emerged out of Ben Ali's RCD, called for the involvement of former RCD members in post-2011 politics, and was headed by Ben Ali's former Foreign Minister, Kamel Morjane.
[33] AFTURD was forced to temporarily halt activities in 2023, with reasons undisclosed, and has not yet resumed its work. However, whilst interviewing Khedija Arfaoui, she indicated that this was due to problems with the current Kais Saied government and its crackdown on independent organisations.

2016 AFTURD report on TAMKIN's activities described it as an empowerment centre offering holistic support services including psychological counselling, legal

assistance, medical care, vocational training, and socio-economic reintegration programmes, fostering an environment where women can see themselves as agents of change, rather than passive recipients of aid (AFTURD 2016). The former AFTURD member additionally noted that TAMKIN was envisioned as part of AFTURD's expanded post-2011 strategy to promote women's security, which included supporting Law 58, innovating data methodologies, launching awareness tools, expanding regionally, and enhancing listening centres and shelters nationwide (Anonymous, personal communication, 14 January 2025). This strategic pivot enabled AFTURD to manage TAMKIN as Tunisia's first national, state-endorsed shelter for GBV survivors, marking its transition from a research-focused body under Ben Ali to a key norm entrepreneur. She also stressed that TAMKIN operated under a formal agreement with MFFES, receiving state subsidies (Ibid) – a testament to the WSECoP's success in shifting GBV from a private issue to a public policy concern. By embedding feminist principles into the structure of state-supported shelters, AFTURD and its partners were not merely addressing immediate needs, but also attempting to transform societal attitudes towards GBV as warranting institutional response.

AFTURD's 2016 report showed that TAMKIN offered comprehensive services. With a capacity to accommodate 70 individuals, it provided safe housing for women and their children, regardless of age or marital status. Its multidisciplinary team, supported by ATFD, provided crisis intervention, psychosocial support, legal aid, medical care, and professional development, all grounded in a human rights-based approach (AFTURD 2016). By 2017, TAMKIN had assisted 98 women and children, offering up to three months of and vocational training for economic independence (Moghadam 2021:148). Crucially, TAMKIN also built strong partner networks, including local NGOs like Beity and AFC Le Kef, and state institutions such as ONFP, and the Ministries of Social Affairs, Interior, and Health (AFTURD 2016). This

collaboration reflected the WSECoP's norm-shifting mission, fostering institutional reform and multi-sectoral cooperation. Its links with international actors like the Council of Europe and ASBL Solidarity Women-Belgium further embedded TAMKIN within transnational feminist advocacy networks, amplifying its role in shaping global discourses on women's security (Ibid).

Tanassof, operating in close synergy with TAMKIN, further exemplified the WSECoP's aimed-at norm entrepreneurship. Initially launched during the Ben Ali era as an action research hub, it evolved post-uprising into a platform for legal aid, psychological counselling, and socio-professional integration for women experiencing economic precarity and violence (AFTURD 2016). From 2016, Tanassof also partnered with TAMKIN, serving as a space for reception, orientation, experience exchange, and networking amongst stakeholders addressing GBV. It operated specialised listening desks, staffed by psychologists, lawyers, and social workers primarily from ATFD and Beity, offering round-the-clock support to women from across Tunisia (Ibid). Tanassof's extensive outreach activities, such as legal workshops, rights-awareness seminars, and empowerment sessions, were thus evidently designed to foster resilience and challenge the internalisation of patriarchal norms, a viewpoint reinforced by the former AFTURD member, who stated that they were attempting to *"champion the idea of women's empowerment as a societal value to be bolstered"* (Anonymous, personal communication, 14 January 2025). By reframing women's experiences from victimhood to agency, Tanassof complemented TAMKIN's protective functions, forming a holistic strategy for societal change.

Tanassof also aspired to challenge entrenched cultural convictions, demonstrated for example through its 2015 collaboration with the Tunisian National Theatre (AFTURD 2015). This partnership produced theatrical events seeking to challenge patriarchal attitudes, including a popular play titled "K.O.", performed throughout February 2015 and considered "a great success with the public" (Kapitalis 2015). According to a Kapitalis' – a Tunisian daily – review of the play, it followed "O", a woman who turns to boxing for empowerment after being mugged, and "K", a former boxer grappling with past trauma. Exploring themes of violence, resistance, and harassment, it was

reviewed as a “reflection on the new forms of social violence in post-revolutionary Tunisia” (Ibid). The play also paid homage to historical Tunisian women resisting oppression, with the protagonist delivering a line stating “I am Aziza Othmana, I am Saïda Manoubia, I am Habiba Msika…I am the Tunisian woman. In short, I am Tunisia” (Ibid).[34] By engaging the arts as a medium for feminist activism, AFTURD invited public reflection on gender roles, power dynamics, and the pervasive nature of GBV, with the play thus serving as an educational tool, highlighting the intersection of activism, art, and policy advocacy in the WSECoP’s norm entrepreneurial efforts.

AFTURD’s attempt at norm entrepreneurship was further illustrated through the 2015 *“Écouter et Débattre: Agissons pour le Changement”* (‘Listen and Debate: Let’s Act for Change’) project, organised by Tanassof in partnership with OXFAM in 2015. Inspired by the Egyptian radio series *“Be 100 Ragel”* (‘Worth 100 Men’), which spotlights women defying oppression, the project featured group listening sessions followed by Tanassof-facilitated debates on the social situations, choices, and behaviours depicted (AFTURD 2016). When I questioned the former AFTURD member about this project, she stated that it primarily aimed at societal re-thinking of gender roles, GBV, and women’s rights through *“edutainment”* – blending education with entertainment (Anonymous, personal communication, 14 January 2025).

Beginning in September 2015, AFTURD appointed six facilitators and five supporters to lead listening groups across Le Kef, Jendouba, and Grand Tunis. Each group consisted of 15 participants, engaging in 12 weekly listening sessions, complemented by discussions to unpack and reflect on the content (AFTURD 2016). According to the former AFTURD member, these sessions encouraged critical thinking about societal norms, alongside tracking perceptual shifts regarding gender equality (Anonymous, personal communication, 14 January 2025). The project collected both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the impact, with 63 participants attending 58 listening sessions, each lasting approximately two hours

[34] Aziza Othmana (1606 – 1669) was a Tunisian philanthropist princess from the Mouradites dynasty, who financed a women’s hospital in Tunisia. Saïda Manoubia was a Tunisian feminist icon who lived in the 1300s and became a Sufi scholar, a field dominated by men, after refusing an arranged marriage to a relative. Habiba Msika (1903 – 1930) was a popular Tunisian actress who was murdered by her jealous lover.

(AFTURD 2016). AFTURD's project analysis noted several key outcomes: listening groups from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, fostering inclusive dialogue;

active participation of both women and men; development of a rigorous data collection tool tailored to the Tunisian context, assessing shifts in gender-related perceptions; and documented 'stories of change', reflecting significant transformations in participants' views and attitudes towards GBV (Ibid). This project therefore exemplifies AFTURD's innovative use of cultural mediums to challenge patriarchal norms and influence public discourse. By adopting the edutainment approach, AFTURD humanised women's experiences, fostered empathy, and inspired behavioural change, underscoring the WSECoP's role in combining grassroots mobilisation with strategic advocacy to achieve normative shifts in Tunisian society.

However, the initiatives described above must be understood vis-à-vis Tunisia's political, institutional, and cultural landscape. The WSECoP acted as a *situated* norm entrepreneur – capable of producing and circulating feminist knowledge, but constrained in its capacity to institutionalise this knowledge. The ambition behind projects like TAMKIN and Tanassof was not simply to provide services, but to challenge and transform dominant gender norms. They aimed to shift cultural assumptions that violence within the family was a private issue, that survivors should endure in silence, and that women's security was secondary to familial or social cohesion (ATFD 2019). In their place, the centres promoted new normative understandings: that GBV is a violation of rights requiring state protection; that survivors are entitled to legal redress, psychological care, and socio-economic reintegration; and that women are not passive victims but agents capable of exercising choice, autonomy, and leadership (Ibid). Yet, these efforts often remained partial. The former AFTURD member acknowledged the emotional and conceptual power of projects like "Listen and Debate," but also expressed frustration with their reach: *"We helped women reclaim their voices and created awareness, but real change that deeply touches state policy, that's something else"* (Anonymous, personal communication, 14 January 2025). This perspective underscores that the

WSECoP was not an unconstrained transformative actor, but one negotiating within the very structures it sought to alter. AFTURD's forced closure in 2023 amidst a broader civil society crackdown further illustrates the fragility of feminist gains. Moreover, recent data indicates that GBV remains pervasive in Tunisia: a 2023 Afrobarometer survey, found over half of Tunisians viewed GBV as "somewhat" or "very" common in their communities (Afrobarometer 2023),[35] and Arab Barometer data reported that 54% believed violence against women had increased – women more so than men..[36] These statistics both highlight the challenge in addressing GBV, and the need for continued, multifaceted efforts to prioritise women's security.

7.2.3 Mediating and Negotiating International Frameworks

Since 2011, and especially after the adoption of the 2014 Constitution, international security aid to Tunisia has grown exponentially (Musina 2023:471). This reflects a broader post-uprising shift, wherein development agendas became entwined with security imperatives, particularly in the aftermath of episodes of political violence within Tunisia (2013 – 2016), as well as across Europe (2015 – 2016) (Ibid). These changes created new challenges and opportunities for Tunisia's women's organisations, prompting the emergence of new roles that merit attention, as this section is concerned with the new roles afforded to these organisations after Ben Ali's departure. As Chapter 2 showed, state feminism maintained a highly top-down approach to women's security, often focusing on limited legal reforms disregarding the more structural socio-economic inequalities that women faced. International representation was also monopolised by UNFT and MAFFEPA, as detailed in Chapter 3.

Following the uprising there occurred a shift in agency. In 2015, the UN began urging Tunisia to implement its first National Action Plan (NAP) aligned with Resolution 1325, which Tunisia had ratified in 2006, but left "quite dormant until 2015" (Della

[35] https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/AD601-Tunisians-consider-gender-violence-a-top-priority-but-a-privatematter-Afrobarometer-13feb23.pdf
[36] https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/AD601-Tunisians-consider-gender-violence-a-top-priority-but-a-privatematter-Afrobarometer-13feb23.pdf

Valle 2022:128), the year other Arab countries such as Jordan begun developing NAPs. The Tunisian government – then headed by Beji Caid Essebsi whose Nidaa Tounes political party had won a plurality in the 2014 parliamentary election – [37] invited civil society proposals for a NAP, culminating in the adoption of a 2018–2020 NAP. This is an example of policymakers using the 'instrumental' knowledge of epistemic communities, whereby "policymakers inform epistemic communities about the aims of their agenda, while the latter provide technical knowledge about related matters" (Kourtelis 2021:5), as outlined in Chapter 1. In response to Essebsi, Aswat Nissa launched its WPS programme in 2016, in partnership with UN Women, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), and the Tunisian state. As detailed below, this programme represented a pivotal shift for women's organisations from passive international aid recipients, to active negotiators and mediators of international frameworks. Unlike the Ben Ali era, when international frameworks were imposed through top-down mechanisms, the post-uprising context enabled two-way dialogue between women's organisations and international partners. This shift allowed Aswat Nissa – both as a CSO and epistemic community – to recontextualise global WPS frameworks in line with local realities, addressing the structural roots of GBV and advocating for holistic reform of Tunisia's security sector. However, as this section will show, despite expanded operational space, Aswat Nissa's implementation of the WPS programme unfolded within an asymmetric practice assemblage, echoing the uneven epistemic CoP formed between UNFT and the Benalist state (see Chapter 3). This reveals both continuities and ruptures in the Tunisian state's post-2011 approach to women's security, as well as the complexities inherent in Tunisia's political landscape, reflective of the historical legacies of state feminism.

[37] Nidaa Tounes, meaning 'Call of Tunisia', is a secular political party established in mid-2012 by Beji Caid Essebsi, a seasoned politician with ties to the Bourguibist and Benalist regimes. His party emerged as a coalition encompassing former RCD members, secular leftists, progressive liberals, and Bourguiba supporters, aiming to counterbalance Ennahda. In the October 2014 parliamentary elections, Nidaa Tounes secured 86 out of 217 seats, surpassing Ennahda, which obtained 69 seats. Essebsi subsequently won the 2014 presidency, further consolidating the party's influence. In February 2015, a coalition government was formed featuring power-sharing arrangements between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, in order to prevent potential unrest.

Whilst Aswat Nissa is analysed as a key actor within the WSECoP, it also qualifies as an epistemic community in its own right. Founded in 2011, Aswat Nissa brought together feminist practitioners and policy experts who shared a normative commitment to gender-sensitive governance, and who collectively produced and applied specialised knowledge on women's participation in peacebuilding and security reform. In line with Antoniades' purpose-oriented approach to epistemic communities, Aswat Nissa constituted a socially-recognised, locally-embedded knowledge-based network that sought to influence Tunisia's post-uprising security architecture by integrating gender perspectives into national frameworks. As articulated by founder Ikram Ben Said in our interview, and demonstrated by its design and implementation of Tunisia's WPS programme, Aswat Nissa engaged in authoritative norm production through training, research, and advocacy. Its work with DCAF and Tunisia's Ministry of the Interior, including data-driven advocacy, policy briefs, and technical consultation, illustrates the layering of its roles: the CSO layer (advocacy, coalition-building, capacity-building); matched by an epistemic layer (conceptual framing of problems, translating comparative standards into locally usable guidance, brokering knowledge between grassroots actors and state bureaucracies, and embedding gender-sensitive norms into public discourse and state practice). It yet remained closely aligned with the WSECoP, advancing shared priorities through coordinated methods and collective strategic vision, as an individual epistemic actor and a core node within Tunisia's feminist security ecosystem.

Compared to the wider literature on NAPs implementing UNSCR 1325 – which it is outside my scope to review – Tunisia remains an underexplored non-Western case. Whilst growing scholarship has examined NAPs in Global South and Eastern European contexts such as Poland, Ukraine, and Indonesia (see Thomas and Whiting 2002), often emphasising tensions between externally imposed norms and local ownership, my analysis contributes to this body of work by highlighting Tunisia as a distinctive case. Here, local organisations played a critical mediating role, resisting norm diffusion models privileging international templates over local priorities.

I focus here specifically on Aswat Nissa's WPS programme, before subsequently discussing the less extensive WPS-related activities of another WSECoP member, AFTURD, for several reasons. Firstly, Aswat Nissa was one of the few organisations which responded to Essebsi's call for proposals, which was "not well publicised…was very centralised at the national level…and there were no focus groups in the regions" (Della Valle 2022:129). Indeed, it is telling that when questioned about ATFD's involvement in the first Tunisian NAP implementing Resolution 1325, Ben Jemia stated: *"I don't know, there were no efforts to involve us"* (Interview, 28 October 2024). That being said, and a second reason why it is important to analyse Aswat Nissa's WPS programme, is that both the independent feminist activists I spoke to such as Dorra Mahfoudh and her daughter Amel Mahfoudh, as well as leaders of organisations such as UNFT's Jerbi, directly singled it out as the most prominent and successful programme of its kind, following general questioning about the involvement of Tunisian women's organisations in the WPS agenda. The programme's multifaceted approach, which combined capacity-building, training, advocacy, and grassroots mobilization, also exemplified the women's organisations' shift from pre-2011 advocacy, to the post-2011 involvement in active negotiation and mediation of international frameworks. Aswat Nissa's role in reinterpreting global agendas like Resolution 1325, alongside its collaboration with DCAF to train Tunisian parliamentarians and security personnel on gender-sensitive security sector reform, provide a comprehensive example of the influence accorded to post-2011 organisations in shaping global security policies to better reflect local needs. The importance of this program lay also in its inclusivity, ensuring that gender equality and peacebuilding were not just theoretical concepts, but actionable policies tailored to Tunisia's unique socio-political context.

Aswat Nissa's WPS Programme

As discussed in this thesis' theoretical chapter, the theoretical concept of epistemic CoPs is able to offer a critical lens through which to examine the ways in which local actors mediate and negotiate international frameworks, enabling nuanced

understanding of how local knowledge and global frameworks interact. This interaction occurs through the performative practices of actors in communities – such as Aswat Nissa and the WPS programme – involving knowledge that is not merely possessed but created through active engagement in institutional, social, and political contexts (Adler and Faubert 2022).

Aswat Nissa's role in mediating the WPS agenda exemplifies the practice-oriented approach within epistemic communities advanced by this thesis. This was made explicitly clear to me during my interview with its founder, Ikram Ben Said. Before delving into my interview with Ben Said, which will be drawn upon here to substantiate various of my arguments, it is essential to contextualise her role as a key figure in Tunisia's feminist landscape and political evolution. Her trajectory in gender advocacy began long before the 2011 uprising, when she was serving as a programme manager at an international NGO in Tunisia, managing youth, women, and dialogue departments (Interview, 20 December 2024). Despite her organisation facing constraints due to heavy state control, she worked within the confined space to craft programmes promoting women's economic empowerment, thus gaining firsthand experience of both the limitations and possibilities for feminist mobilisation under Benalist authoritarian rule. In 2011, Ben Said utilised this experience to establish Aswat Nissa, which quickly became one of Tunisia's leading women's organisations with platforms for political training, civic engagement, and policy advocacy (Ibid). Throughout her work, and as the top figure at Aswat Nissa, Ben Said has thus engaged directly with policymakers, international organisations, and grassroots activists, giving her unparalleled insight into both the pre- and post-2011 political landscapes. She was therefore superbly positioned to analyse women's security in Tunisia.

Despite its significance, Aswat Nissa's WPS programme has received limited academic attention. The only valuable references include Musina (2023), who devotes a single paragraph to analysing the programme within the broader context of EU-Tunisia security assemblages, and de Lune (2020), who maps the programme's implementation in a general sense, without subjecting it to theoretical or empirical scrutiny. My analysis builds on these references by offering a much

more in-depth and critical investigation. Drawing on my conversation with Ben Said and organisational publications not previously analysed, this section situates Aswat Nissa's programme within the epistemic communities framework, emphasising its dual role in shaping policy and contesting global-local knowledge asymmetries.

As Ben Said recalled, in 2016, she saw an opportunity to elevate Aswat Nissa's profile both domestically and internationally by responding to Essebsi's call for assistance in devising an NAP for Tunisia (Ibid). Recognising the potential to solidify Aswat Nissa's status as a key actor in gender policy advocacy, she sought to position the organisation as a partner to the state, whilst also increasing its visibility amongst international organisations (Ibid). As a result, in 2017, Aswat Nissa launched its WPS programme, which Ben Said hoped would both influence national policy on women's rights, as well as expand her organisation's reach within Tunisia's policy-making landscape (Ibid; Aswat Nissa 2017). Whilst Aswat Nissa was acting as part of civil society, its work in shaping Tunisia's WPS framework aligns closely with the defining characteristics of an epistemic community. As Haas asserted, epistemic communities derive their influence from their expertise, with their claims to knowledge serving as their primary social power resource, and enabling them access to political decision-making processes (Haas 1992a:16). By positioning itself as a technical knowledge provider to policymakers in the formulation of Tunisia's NAP, Aswat Nissa functioned as an epistemic community, leveraging its expertise on gender-sensitive security reform to shape state-level policy discourse.

According to Aswat Nissa's website, the programme sought to promote a constructive and inclusive dialogue between civil society and the ARP,[38] with the goal of adopting an NAP that accurately represented the diverse perspectives of Tunisian women on peace and security issues (Aswat Nissa 2017). Through capacity-building initiatives, Aswat Nissa trained 45 female ARP deputies from diverse political affiliations on Resolution 1325, strengthening their ability to advocate for gender-sensitive reforms within Tunisia's security sector, linked to CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action (Aswat Nissa 2017; de Lune 2020). These deputies also received

[38] The ARP is Tunisia's lower house of the Parliament, which replaced the NCA and was first elected on 26 October 2014.

specialised training by Aswat Nissa on preventing GBV, tailored to the local context by focusing on Law 58 of 2017, as well as on the integration of genderresponsive budgeting, a critical element of the WPS framework (Ibid). Additionally, gender experts from DCAF conducted sessions on integrating a gender perspective into Security Sector Reform (SSR), with the training elements led by specialists from

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DCAF Geneva's gender division, supported by a national SSR expert in Tunisia from Aswat Nissa. This illustrates how Aswat Nissa operated not only as an epistemic community, but also as part of an epistemic CoP, where knowledge was actively performed and reinforced through deliberation and engagement with institutional actors. Following the CoPs approach, these training sessions and interactions constitute "a CoP's perspective [that] spotlights how sociality impacts practices" (Bicchi 2023:2), through which epistemic knowledge was also produced and reified in institutional settings. This approach situates Aswat Nissa within a broader epistemic and practical knowledge-making process. As Bicchi (2023) notes, practice communities "acquire a co-constitutive role as they develop and nourish the practice in the face of adversity" (Ibid:3) – a dynamic that describes Aswat Nissa's ability to sustain local gender-sensitive security practices within Tunisia's policymaking landscape, demonstrating how epistemic communities can influence policy not only by providing expertise, but also through actively shaping the frameworks and norms through which policies are implemented.

The programme aimed to enhance the elected women's knowledge of SSR, alongside building their capacity to effectively advocate for and implement genderinclusive approaches within the SSR process at the local level (Ibid). This work emphasized how gender equality could be integrated into the security sector, ensuring women's participation in decision-making and the design of security policies. It also exemplified Aswat Nissa's role in providing what Kourtelis (2019:5) terms "conceptual knowledge," which epistemic communities employ to actively reshape the terms of policy debates rather than merely informing or advancing preexisting agendas, as explained in this thesis' theoretical chapter. By educating elected deputies on gender-responsive budgeting, SSR, and GBV, Aswat Nissa did

not solely provide technical expertise, but also contributed to the redefinition of Tunisia's security landscape through a gender-sensitive lens.

Following these training sessions, Aswat Nissa launched its advocacy initiative in 2018 to promote the implementation of Resolution 1325 and the integration of local gender perspectives into Tunisia's SSR policies (Interview, 20 December 2024). As part of these efforts, a publication by Aswat Nissa reveals that its WPS ambassadors from various regions across Tunisia led nationwide awareness campaigns (Aswat Nissa 2019). Their work began with a data collection effort that surveyed citizens' perceptions of security and women's participation in the security sector, gathering insights from 500 questionnaires (Ibid; de Lune 2020). This research culminated in two publications by Aswat Nissa – a study titled *'Women and Global Security: Towards a Gender-Sensitive Security Sector Reform in Tunisia'*, as well as a policy brief on *'The Place of Gender in the Security Sector'* (Ibid). These documents provided concrete recommendations – influenced by the proposals of local Tunisian women as Ben Said was sure to stress during our interview – to enhance women's participation in security institutions and reinforce mechanisms protecting against GBV, directed specifically at legislators, political parties, and security forces (Ibid; Interview, 20 December 2024). Aswat Nissa's role in producing policy briefs, conducting data collection efforts, and targeting legislators, political parties, and security forces exemplifies its function as a mediator and negotiator of international frameworks. By systematically gathering local perspectives and translating them into actionable recommendations, Aswat Nissa facilitated the adaptation of global WPS norms to Tunisia's specific security context. This aligns with the defining hallmarks of epistemic communities, where expert networks shape governance by providing authoritative knowledge and framing issues in ways that influence decision-making. By acting as a conduit between global frameworks and local policymaking, Aswat Nissa thus both advanced gender-sensitive security reform, as well as reinforced the role of epistemic communities in shaping institutional responses through evidencebased advocacy.

In October 2018, the findings and recommendations were also presented at a conference co-hosted by Aswat Nissa and UN Women. Ben Said shared that during the conference, Aswat Nissa also announced its formation of a network comprising 12 women deputies from various parliamentary groups, who committed to becoming 'Ambassadors' of the WPS agenda in Tunisia, stating that this was in order to ensure sustained local and representative political engagement on gender-sensitive security reforms (Ibid). By bridging global WPS standards with Tunisia's security reform agenda, Aswat Nissa further solidified its role within a CoP, engaging in the interpretation, deliberation, and judgement that characterises the institutionalisation of norms within local political and security frameworks (Bicchi 2023:3). This was followed by an additional Aswat Nissa conference on WPS later in the year, organised in collaboration with DCAF, which brought together a wider audience, including hundreds of journalists and civil society actors (de Lune 2020).

Building on such initiatives, according to materials published by Aswat Nissa, in 2018 Aswat Nissa launched a new programme titled *"Ambassadors for the Prevention of Violent Extremism"*, a key concern of the global WPS agenda (Aswat Nissa 2019). As part of this program, Aswat Nissa again trained 45 young female politicians from Sfax, Montasir, and Tunis on UNSC Resolution 2242 (Ibid).[39] These women subsequently formed a nationwide network dedicated to preventing violent extremism in Tunisia, carrying out community-based prevention initiatives within their respective regions. When I questioned her about this programme, Ben Said expressed her belief that these training sessions on Resolution 2242 reinforced the importance of gender-inclusive strategies in Tunisia's peace and security policies, ensuring that women were recognized as key actors in preventing violence, promoting stability, and shaping policy reforms (Interview, 20 December 2024). She proudly shared that they also led to a significant number of participants in and beneficiaries of the community prevention initiative in Tunis – several hundred women as stated by her – to elect a female mayor for Tunis, Souad Abderrahim, in

[39] Adopted unanimously on 13 October 2015, United Nations Security Council Resolution 2242 strengthens the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda by integrating a gender perspective into counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts. Its key provisions include strengthening women's participation in peace and security; linking women, peace, and security to counterterrorism and violent extremism; the protection of women and girls in armed conflict; improving institutional and financial commitments; and enhancing monitoring and accountability.

2018 (Ibid). Through this programme, Aswat Nissa reinforced its role as a mediator and negotiator of international frameworks, ensuring that global counter-extremism norms were meaningfully adapted to Tunisia's political and security context. By leveraging its expertise and international connections, Aswat Nissa facilitated the translation of Resolution 2242 into practical, community-based initiatives that resonated with local realities. This process aligns with the epistemic community function of providing conceptual knowledge (Kourtelis 2019), as Aswat Nissa sought

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to not only inform policymakers, but also actively redefine the discourse around violent extremism. As I explained in Chapter 1, conceptual knowledge differs from instrumental knowledge in that it is not used simply for technical improvements, but rather for "the redefinition of common problems" (Kourtelis 2019:5). In this case, Aswat Nissa reframed violent extremism not just as a security concern, but as a gendered phenomenon requiring gender-sensitive prevention strategies. By embedding women as key actors in counter-extremism efforts and shaping legislative and institutional approaches accordingly, Aswat Nissa demonstrated the epistemic community's role in influencing policy at a fundamental, normative level.

According to interviews conducted with various Aswat Nissa staff members by Middle East gender researcher Daniela Musina, Aswat Nissa and DCAF continued this work by conducting data collection and policy advocacy on GBV and security sector governance in 2020 (Musina 2023:473). They monitored the implementation of Law 59 on eliminating GBV and worked with Tunisia's Ministry of Interior (MoI) to ensure the effective application of the law, particularly in terms of budget allocations, training programmes, and the operational capacity of security forces to respond to GBV cases (Ibid). By working alongside DCAF and the MoI, Aswat Nissa engaged in an epistemic CoP, where security governance knowledge was not only produced but actively practiced through training, advocacy, and institutional collaboration. This aligns with Bicchi's (2023) emphasis on CoPs as spaces where knowledge is performed and embedded in institutional settings, reinforcing how Aswat Nissa – as an epistemic community – shaped state security responses through sustained engagement with policymakers.

Since 2019, Aswat Nissa had also repeatedly requested information from the MoI regarding budget distributions for the law's implementation, data on abuse recorded by specialised police teams, and details on the training programmes for security forces, including which of the 26 brigades were involved and the number of actual participants in these trainings (Ibid:474). Their findings revealed that the NAP on GBV had been allocated 3.3 million Tunisian dinars (approximately 1 million USD), leading to the launch of a sectoral plan by the MoI in 2020 (Ibid). As a result, 128 mobile police and National Guard units specialized in monitoring and researching GBV crimes were created – 70 in police stations and 60 in National Guard stations – a number that later increased to 130 units in 2021. Notably, 40 percent of these units were headed by women, marking a significant institutional shift towards greater female leadership in security governance (Ibid). This collaboration exemplifies how Aswat Nissa mediated between international security norms and domestic institutional realities, ensuring that gender-sensitive policies were adopted as well as effectively operationalised. By co-creating security governance strategies with DCAF and the MoI, the CoP function of institutionalising knowledge through iterative practice, interpretation, and adaptation within state security structures was also made readily apparent (Bicchi 2023). However, this was also an *epistemic* CoP, as Aswat Nissa contributed not only to institutional knowledge diffusion, but also to the redefinition of security governance through a localised gender-sensitive lens. This approach highlights how women's organisations can reshape security norms, moving beyond simple knowledge transfer to the active reconstruction of security frameworks to prioritise inclusivity and gender equality, thereby contributing to both epistemic and practical security transformations.

Aswat Nissa's data collection efforts also assessed the effectiveness of gendersensitive training programs within Tunisia's security sector (Ibid:475). By tracking the abuse cases recorded by specialized police teams and scrutinizing the content and schedules of training programs, they sought to ensure that security forces were adequately equipped to handle GBV cases in a manner consistent with Tunisia's legal commitments (Ibid). Musina's interviews with staff at the organisation

reveals that Aswat Nissa's emphasis on gender equality in security governance was not just a technical exercise, but a strategic intervention to reshape international frameworks – such as UNSCR 1325 – to better align with Tunisia's socio-political realities. This work highlights Aswat Nissa's role as both a policy watchdog and a reform advocate, ensuring that institutional responses to GBV move beyond legislative commitments to tangible, measurable improvements in women's security and rights. Thus, whilst Aswat Nissa undoubtedly operated within civil society, its work in the WPS programme exemplifies its function as an epistemic community within a CoP, where its conceptual knowledge helped to redefine Tunisia's security norms, institutionalise gender-responsive approaches, and facilitate sustained interactions between policymakers and gender experts. This conceptualisation allows for an integrated understanding of how feminist actors not only provide expertise, but also coconstruct security knowledge through practice-based engagement. By bridging the gap between activism and governance, Aswat Nissa ensured that gender-sensitive security norms were not only articulated in policy discussions but actively institutionalised through practical engagement, sustained training, and iterative policy reform.

Although Aswat Nissa successfully ensured that the local context remained at the centre of its collaborative work, with its advocacy and data-driven policy analysis contributing to both the discussion and practice of women's specific security needs within Tunisia's SSR and creating tangible changes in law enforcement and security policies, I posit here that the ongoing negotiation between local knowledge and global frameworks concurrently exemplifies the asymmetric power dynamics at play in the production and dissemination of knowledge within this epistemic CoP. The international actors – DCAF and UN Women – possessed considerable power through their financial support and technical expertise, with Ben Said noting that her organisation often found itself negotiating competing international narratives, which sometimes diminished the agency of the local communities they were attempting to champion. This occurred during the integration of the gender approach into Tunisia's SSR for example, when DCAF experts suggested that *"deeply ingrained social norms and traditions continue to uphold a rigid division of labour based on gender"*

(Interview, 20 December 2024), suggesting that the origins of gender-based discrimination and violence lay within Tunisian society, which Aswat Nissa rejected but which yet made its way into the final NAP document. Whilst exemplifying the practice-oriented approach within epistemic communities, Aswat Nissa's critical engagement with the WPS frameworks also highlighted the limitations of some global WPS objectives, particularly those that were reduced to technical benchmarks rather than holistic changes addressing the deep-rooted causes of GBV in Tunisia. As an epistemic community, Aswat Nissa indeed worked to reframe these global norms in a way that was both responsive to Tunisia's specific socio-political context and reflective of the cultural practices embedded in Tunisian society. However, this also readily illustrated the asymmetry of power inherent in international-local interactions, as the WPS practice assemblage described saw a local actor – Aswat Nissa – engage with global actors to negotiate the application of WPS resolutions that were often shaped by external, Western-centric norms.

Further, despite Aswat Nissa's efforts, a key finding from its monitoring of the implementation of Law 58 revealed that the female component of specialized GBV units in the Tunisian security sector was significantly low, with women's representation in these units not exceeding 12.5 percent (Musina 2023:473). These units, tasked with monitoring and de-briefing information related to GBV, were primarily relegated to advisory roles and were often excluded from decision-making bodies. These findings indicate that, whilst the Tunisian state established important policies, the institutionalization of these gender-sensitive practices remained hindered by persistent gendered power structures. The final text of the Tunisian NAP on WPS also flattened GBV into a protection narrative that abstracted the structural causes of violence from both the institutional and coercive actions of the state. Indeed, it is worth quoting Musina's remarks concerning this at length here:

> "It is not by chance that former minister of women and family, Naziha Laabidi, who promulgated the Tunisian NAP in 2018, was among the founders, together with the…former national security adviser to President Essebsi and member of the National Security Council…of a lobbying think tank…this says

> a lot about this type of state feminism. Figures like these are part of a Tunisian political elite that is very well-positioned transnationally, which constantly cultivates relationships and networks with 'Western' partners in particular, and which enjoys unequivocally much weight in the ways WPS and NAP objectives are formulated and implemented. These objectives…seem to converge more on the strategic priorities of donor partners, rather than on the real local Tunisian needs" (Musina 2023:474).

That one of Musina's interviewees, a Tunisian LGBTQI activist, proclaimed that "the new spirit of state feminism inaugurated in 2018 is not much different from Ben Ali's" (Ibid) is thus unsurprising in this regard, as well as spotlights additional layers of asymmetry within the WPS practice assemblage, both between Aswat Nissa and Tunisia's MoI, and between the MoI and the international actors. Essebsi himself served as Minister of Foreign Affairs under Bourguiba, and Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies under Ben Ali, further complicating analysis of the 2018 NAP and the WPS programme. The NAP's and Law 58's structural reliance on coercive state institutions for their implementation – such as the MoI and security forces – mirrored the state feminism of the Benalist past, with an emphasis on state-driven policies and top-down enforcement, as opposed to a more participatory or grassroots approach that one might expect in a democratic system. I thus term these 'after state feminism' dynamics as *post-authoritarian state instrumentalism* – a continuation of state feminism's performative dimension, without its formal structures. Law 58, the WPS programme, and the 2018 NAP are a testament to Tunisia's democratic evolution, but they also underscore the ambivalence of the post-revolutionary context, where democratic aspirations and authoritarian legacies are in constant negotiation. By focusing on global frameworks and national realities, Aswat Nissa and other WSECoP actors played a critical role in navigating these complex dynamics, ensuring that women's security issues remained at the forefront of Tunisia's evolving political and security agendas. Nonetheless, the persistence of state feminism, even in its more democratic guise of state instrumentalism, demonstrated that political transitions are rarely clear-cut and that the history of political regimes continues to shape how democratic frameworks are constructed, negotiated, and implemented.

AFTURD's WPS Programme

This issue of state instrumentalism in the Essebsi government was also clearly borne out by AFTURD's involvement in WPS initiatives in Tunisia through its project *"Participation et vulgarisation de la Résolution 1325"* ('Participation and Popularisation of Resolution 1325'). Although AFTURD's WPS involvement was small-scale and unassociated with the NAP submitted by Tunisia in response to UNSCR 1325, its concern with much of the same issues substantiates the existence of a WSECoP, fostering a joint environment for knowledge production and policy influence. As Bicchi notes, "the alignment between practical engagements is essential for the establishment of a CoP, whereas instead conflicting practices and expectations sap its mid-term chances" (Bicchi 2023:2). Bicchi's argument also builds on the early suggestions in the literature on CoPs, according to which the foundation of CoPs is situated in the primordial practical experience (Ibid; Lave and Wenger 1991).

Launched in 2014 and implemented until the end of 2015, AFTURD's WPS programme focused on the participation and popularisation of Resolution 1325. AFTURD's activities within this programme exemplified its role as an epistemic community, through both generating knowledge as well as contributing to the institutionalisation of practices that advanced women's political participation. This reminds us of Ruggie's original formulation of epistemic communities described in Chapter 1, whereby he suggested that epistemic communities play a critical role in the institutionalisation of practices within political settings, contributing to the construction of social reality by framing the relationship between causes and consequences (Machon et al. 2018:3). This was evident in AFTURD's approach, as it sought to promote women's security alongside embedding these principles within Tunisia's political and social institutions.

According to an AFTURD publication, the project's primary objectives were to establish an inventory of legal and social achievements supporting women's

participation in political life and decision-making, whilst identifying gaps and institutional obstacles (AFTURD 2016). AFTURD's efforts highlighted the political and socio-cultural barriers hindering effective implementation, thus reinforcing its role in articulating and aggregating knowledge-based understandings of gender and security in Tunisia, also consistent with Haas' (2015) definition of epistemic communities. Central to the project was an extensive study that assessed the state of women's political participation in Tunisia, identifying obstacles to effective participation and analysing the roles of key actors promoting women's access to decision-making positions (Ibid). The study also examined lobbying strategies employed over the previous three years, providing recommendations to improve the legal framework and prevent electoral injustices and GBV during elections (Ibid). In addition to research, AFTURD organised several training and awareness workshops aimed at civil society activists, elected officials, and prospective candidates. These workshops focused on Resolution 1325, women's political participation, the antiterrorist bill, and local governance. In March 2015, AFTURD also conducted a workshop on "Women and Local Governance," training regional representatives to organise awareness sessions in Jendouba, Kef, Kasserine, Béja, and Greater Tunis (Ibid). Additionally, in April 2015, a reflection workshop on "The Anti-Terrorist Bill: Balancing Security and Human Rights" engaged parliamentarians, magistrates, security experts, and civil society representatives (Ibid). Finally, in November 2015, AFTURD hosted a workshop titled "Towards the Equal Participation of Women in Elected Bodies", presenting the findings of its study on women's political participation (Ibid).

Based on the above, AFTURD's evidence-based approach, combined with its advocacy efforts, positioned it as a key expert knowledge provider within Tunisia's feminist landscape, contributing to the institutionalisation of gender-sensitive policies and practices within wider WSECoP efforts on WPS. Importantly, this was a duallayer role rather than an alternative identity. As a CSO, AFTURD mobilised constituencies and allies; convened multi-stakeholder workshops with parliamentarians, magistrates, security officials, and activists; and pressed authorities publicly on parity, electoral safeguards, and GBV. In parallel, as an

epistemic actor**,** it produced and validated policy-relevant knowledge – the inventory of legal/social gains and gaps, the nationwide study on women's political participation, and concrete recommendations on electoral law and GBV during elections – and brokered that knowledge into state channels by translating UNSCR 1325 into domestically usable guidance, curating comparative references, and drafting language for discussion in parliamentary and policy fora. It also trained regional representatives who then cascaded awareness sessions in Jendouba, Kef, Kasserine, Béja, and Greater Tunis.

Nonetheless, when I questioned the former AFTURD member about the organisation's WPS initiatives, she stated that their planned extension into 2017 was abandoned after they were repeatedly ignored by the government (Anonymous, personal communication, 14 January 2025). This draws our attention to two critical observations. Firstly, following Antoniades' observations which I outlined in Chapter 1, it reveals epistemic communities to be part of "a concrete – multiple and multilevel – policy game" (Antoniades 2003:32). In Antoniades' framework, the influence of epistemic communities is considerably curtailed in the absence of engagement with government figures and representatives. Antoniades theorises that the mere possession of knowledge is insufficient for influence; rather, "active political positioning, and not the mere content of the knowledge, creates the epistemic community's influence" (Zito 2001b:467). This demonstrates how, in the face of longestablished illiberal state structures, epistemic communities' influence is often a product of their position within political coalitions and the strategic alliances they forge.

Secondly, it underscores the lasting legacy of Benalist state feminism as postauthoritarian state instrumentalism, which continued to influence aspects of stateCSO relations in post-uprising Tunisia. The Ben Ali regime's model of state feminism, characterised by a top-down approach to women's rights that co-opted feminist agendas within state structures, undoubtedly left a residual framework wherein state institutions maintained a gatekeeping role over gender-related policy initiatives, especially those involving foreign actors. Although AFTURD, Aswat Nissa,

and other WSECoP members were engaged in knowledge-creation processes aimed at localising international WPS agendas, this reality serves as a potent reminder of the contested nature of democracy. Equally, it compels us to acknowledge the essentially contested nature of knowledge itself. Following Foucault, knowledge is not neutral; it implies power. There are no knowledge practices – texts, discourses, speeches – whose meanings are immune to the impact of power dynamics upon value systems and thought (Foucault 1980). In line with Sadiki's concept of democratic knowledge, introduced in Chapter 5, democratisation often unfolds within contexts where it is a discursive construct shaped through language, political ferment, and ideology (Sadiki 2015:703). When Islamists, secularists, leftists, or pan-Arabists speak about democracy, they do so through narratives and texts imbued with their political and ideological preferences (Ibid:708). As Sadiki rightly perceived, the 'Arab Spring' erupted at a historical juncture where the utility and explanatory power of Western transitology faced significant revision and problematisation (Ibid). Although it is beyond my purview here to detail the gaps in studies on democratic transition, it is ultimately important for my thesis' purposes to present knowledge as operating within a web of power relations, where it both moulds power and, conversely, is moulded by it (Ibid:709). This dynamic aligns with Foucault's assertion that knowledge and power are not static entities, but rather socially constructed formations embedded in discourse. In Tunisia's WPS case, the interplay between the WSECoP and both state and foreign institutions reflects this complex entanglement, where the struggle for women's security is simultaneously a struggle over the production, dissemination, and legitimisation of knowledge. Thus, the experiences of the WSECoP highlight the critical need to interrogate not only the structures of power that shape democratic transitions, but also the knowledge systems that sustain and contest them. Enabled by our critical theoretical epistemic CoPs framework, this is therefore connected to attempts at "'decolonising' (and democratising) the entire field of 'transitology'" (Ibid).

7.3 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the multifaceted role of the WSECoP in post-2014 Tunisia, revealing its dynamic evolution as a transformative force in advancing women's

physical and economic security. As Tunisia transitioned from the immediate aftermath of its constitutional drafting and first democratic elections, the WSECoP shifted its focus towards addressing deep-seated gender inequalities through legal reform, norm entrepreneurship, and the mediation of international frameworks. This analysis underscored the WSECoP's strategic versatility, as it navigated the intersections of grassroots activism, policy advocacy, and global governance structures to consolidate gains for Tunisian women within an evolving democratic landscape.

The first key function examined was the WSECoP's role as a policy advocacy and reform facilitator, most obviously exemplified by its pivotal involvement in the passage of Law 58. The WSECoP's collective efforts transformed abstract constitutional commitments into concrete legal protections against GBV. Through strategic lobbying, coalition-building, and evidence-based advocacy, organisations like ATFD and AFTURD mobilised expertise to influence legislative processes, demonstrating how epistemic communities can shape legal frameworks within transitional democracies. This function highlighted the WSECoP's capacity to bridge the divide between civil society and state institutions, operationalising democratic principles through sustained engagement with political actors.

Second, the chapter illuminated the WSECoP's function as a norm entrepreneur, focusing on its efforts to reshape societal attitudes towards gender equality and women's roles in both public and private spheres. Initiatives such as the TAMKIN shelter and Tanassof showcased how AFTURD, as an epistemic community, extended its influence beyond policy corridors to challenge patriarchal norms embedded in Tunisia's socio-cultural fabric. By fostering spaces that provided both protection and empowerment, AFTURD not only addressed the immediate needs of GBV survivors, but also cultivated a broader cultural shift towards recognising women's agency and rights. However, this normative work was also advanced within a constrained political field marked by authoritarian drift, institutional fragility, and persistent patriarchal norms.

The chapter also examined the WSECoP's critical role as a mediator and negotiator of international frameworks, particularly through Aswat Nissa's engagement with the WPS agenda. By localising global norms such as Resolution 1325, the WSECoP demonstrated its ability to adapt international frameworks to Tunisia's specific sociopolitical context. However, the asymmetries in these interactions highlighted the complexities of knowledge-power dynamics, where local actors navigated both opportunities and constraints imposed by international partnerships.

Chapter 7 also critically engaged with the limitations faced by the WSECoP. Despite its achievements, the WSECoP encountered structural barriers, including inconsistent policy implementation, limited regional outreach, and enduring state instrumentalism of women's security issues. These dynamics highlight the need to view it not as a linear or transformative force, but as a political actor engaged in an iterative, contested process shaped by power, positionality, and constraint. The WSECoP's experiences recounted in the above arguably reflect the broader tensions of Tunisia's democratic experiment – an ongoing negotiation between revolutionary ideals, entrenched power structures, and the resilient pursuit of gender justice.

Chapter 8: Women's Economic Security in Focus: The WSECoP and Economic Empowerment in post-2014 Tunisia

8.1 Introduction

As established in Chapter 7, the WSECoP played a crucial role in post-2014 Tunisia as a policy advocacy and reform facilitator and norm entrepreneur, in relation to Tunisian women's physical security. Chapter 8 now empirically extends this argument by examining how the WSECoP performed these functions regarding Tunisian women's post-2014 *economic* security. I use economic security in the human security tradition as women's freedom from want in the economic domain and the capability to sustain a dignified livelihood over time, safeguarded by laws, budgets, and institutions (UNDP 1994; Commission on Human Security 2003). Substantively, this means reliable access to income-earning opportunities; fair and safe working conditions; non-discriminatory access to assets, inheritance and property; social protection across the life course; access to credit and markets; and protection from economic forms of gendered violence and coercive control that restrict mobility, work, or control over earnings (Winter 2023). Analytically, I treat economic security as outcomes plus enabling conditions, such as individual/household capabilities and resources; institutions and services; and legalpolicy frameworks (Ibid). This framing is gendered and intersectional, and links directly to the cases examined below.

Chapter 8 also re-examines the WSECoP's involvement in the fight for equal inheritance, which was explored in Chapter 4 during the Ben Ali period. Post-2011, the WSECoP's efforts concerning equal inheritance expanded to include direct political advocacy, public mobilisation, and legal challenges, reflecting its enhanced capacity to influence policy reforms and societal attitudes in a more open political landscape. The uprising laid bare stark disparities between urban and rural areas and exposed the true extent of poverty, particularly as it impacted women – information that had previously been obscured by authoritarian propaganda.

Additionally, Tunisia's democratic transition has been punctuated by a serious economic and social crisis characterized by very low growth, enormous internal and external debt, a growing trade balance deficit, and an increase in the unemployment rate, which have also disproportionately affected women and the youth (ATFD 2020). In response, the WSECoP significantly expanded its activities in this domain, devising strategies to address these pressing challenges. As this chapter will explore, these post-2011 interventions highlight the WSECoP's evolution in addressing systemic inequalities and demonstrate its expanded role in fostering women's economic empowerment in Tunisia's democratic transition.

Whilst several grey literature sources document individual WSECoP initiatives in the post-2014 period, the projects examined below have not been the subject of sustained academic study. No existing academic work, to my knowledge, has analysed these projects side-by-side or interpreted them as knowledge-producing initiatives through the epistemic CoP framework. This chapter therefore offers a new contribution by subjecting these projects to a rigorous analytical lens, examining how these organisations simultaneously reproduced and attempted to challenge existing gender hierarchies, and exposing the gap that often exists between knowledge production and its translation into structural change.

Through relying upon a diverse dataset providing a comprehensive understanding of the WSECoP's role in shaping women's economic security in Tunisia, including interviews with key feminist activists from ATFD, AFTURD, Aswat Nissa, and others; official reports and project documents from these organisations as well as their project partners; media coverage from Tunisian and international outlets; and academic literature on Tunisia's women's organisations, this chapter begins by analysing the WSECoP's role as a situated norm entrepreneur in advancing women's economic security post-2014 through initiatives such as Aswat Nissa's WPA. It then explores the WSECoP's policy advocacy efforts through projects such as AFTURD's rural economic empowerment initiatives, building upon the evidence provided in Chapter 7 exemplifying Aswat Nissa and AFTURD as epistemic communities, alongside their broader membership in Tunisian civil society; before

revisiting the fight for equal inheritance in the post-Ben Ali era (summarised in Appendix Table A9). In keeping with the themes of this thesis, Chapter 8 also engages the issue of state feminism, reflecting on how the WSECoP's fight for women's economic security once again revealed the complexities and contradictions of Tunisia's gender policies. As in Chapter 7, this chapter concludes its analysis in 2021, marking the political rupture caused by Kais Saied's unconstitutional power grab. Despite this challenge, the WSECoP did not halt its efforts, as demonstrated in the final section of this chapter, which concludes with a brief consideration of the WSECoP's sustained relevance in Tunisia's ever-evolving contemporary political landscape.

In doing so, Chapter 8 underscores the WSECoP as an epistemic CoP, where advocacy itself becomes a site of knowledge production and learning. Through shared practices, collaborative learning, and sustained advocacy, the WSECoP advanced women's economic security in Tunisia. Further, by integrating its research, advocacy, and capacity-building to navigate Tunisia's complex socio-political terrain, the WSECoP created a dynamic space for knowledge production and policy influence concerning women in Tunisia, in this way not only influencing policy reforms, but also fostering cultural shifts in perceptions of women's economic roles. Its collaborative efforts, historical context, and expanded scope of work tangibly emphasise its critical role in Tunisia's gender governance landscape, beyond the more limited position it would occupy if it were only a standard civil society actor. Although in this chapter I treat ATFD, AFTURD, Aswat Nissa and partners as CSOs in line with the literature; my contribution is to show how, within civil society, they also exercised epistemic functions. Unlike standard CSOs, these organisations navigated and influenced Tunisia's legal and institutional frameworks, making them key actors in national policymaking and gender governance.

8.2 The WSECoP and Women's Economic Security

8.2.1 The WSECoP as a Norm Entrepreneur

This section examines how WSECoP organisations pursued norm entrepreneurship in women's post-2014 economic security, and where those efforts met structural limits. Although the WSECoP attempted to promote alternative visions of gendered economic participation, these efforts were often confronted by entrenched institutional, political, and cultural resistances. Thus, this section does not present these organisations as wholly transformative agents, but rather examines the *partial*, contested nature of their interventions.

In order to evidence the WSECoP's complex norm entrepreneurship vis-à-vis women's economic security, this section will firstly focus on Aswat Nissa's WPA, whose initiatives exemplify this WSECoP organisation's multifaceted strategies in addressing gendered socio-economic inequalities. The decision to focus specifically on Aswat Nissa's WPA is rooted in its unique contribution to women's economic security, through a multifaceted and sustained approach. Its long-term impact – from 2012 to 2019 – offers a comprehensive case to examine the WSECoP's norm entrepreneurship, particularly in fostering systemic change over time. Further, its geographical and ideological diversity, engaging women from regions across Tunisia and spanning political affiliations from Islamist to secularist parties, underscores the WSECoP's success in uniting diverse voices under a common goal of advancing women's economic security. Moreover, the WPA's tangible outcomes, such as training hundreds of women and enabling them to integrate gender-responsive budgeting into governance, provide clear evidence of the WSECoP's influence in shaping economic policy. The central role of Ikram Ben Said, who not only founded Aswat Nissa but also spearheaded the WPA, further justifies this focus, as her insights from years of advocacy and policy engagement enrich the analysis presented in this chapter.

I then focus on ATFD and AFTURD's AMAL project. Through involving ATFD and AFTURD, AMAL showcases the breadth of the WSECoP, highlighting the diverse actors within the community and its collective capabilities. More importantly, AMAL also exemplifies the WSECoP as an epistemic CoP by revealing that all the women's organisations analysed within the WSECoP in this section focused on the cocreation

of conceptual knowledge, normative frameworks, and strategies aiming to reshape societal structures. This project also brings attention to rural women's economic security, which became a key concern after the downfall of Ben Ali's regime, demonstrating that these organisations actively followed through on addressing this issue. By deliberately foregrounding rural and subaltern women, this case corrects potential urban/Tunis bias and shows how epistemic work travels outside the capital. Additionally, AMAL's collaboration with Oxfam underscores the WSECoP's ability to engage successfully with international partners to amplify local capacities and advocate for systemic reforms, with the project's simultaneous emphasis on grassroots mobilisation and participatory methods highlighting the WSECoP's commitment to empowering women as active contributors to economic decision-making processes. Lastly, the project's holistic approach, combining vocational training, financial literacy, and micro-entrepreneurship, provides a comprehensive case study of the WSECoP's multifaceted efforts to tackle women's economic security.

Aswat Nissa's Women's Political Academy

Part two of Article 46 of Tunisia's 2014 Constitution reads as follows: "The state guarantees the equality of opportunities between women and men to have access to all levels of responsibility in all domains" (Government of Tunisia 2014). The Constitution, in Article 40, also guarantees women their right to "decent working conditions and to a fair wage", free of discrimination (Ibid; Arab Reform Initiative 2015). Moreover, the 2014 document committed the state to empowering women to reconcile family duties and work requirements, as well as providing working mothers with maternity care and protection (Ibid). However, a decade later in 2024, whilst speaking to Ben Said, the Founder of Aswat Nissa, she stated that *"Tunisia has abandoned the revolutionary ideals and constitutional principles of freedom, dignity, and justice"* (Interview, 20 December 2024). First introduced in Chapter 5, Ben Said's continued relevance as a key source in Chapter 8 is justified by her longstanding engagement with Tunisia's feminist landscape, both pre- and post2011. As Aswat Nissa's top figure, she has been at the forefront of initiatives promoting women's

political and economic empowerment, leveraging her experience as a former programme manager for an international NGO under the Ben Ali regime. Her direct involvement with policymakers, international organisations, and grassroots activists equips her with unique insights into Tunisia's evolving political and socioeconomic context, making her an authoritative voice on the WSECoP's role in advancing women's economic security.

During our conversation, Ben Said cited political measures such as Najla Bouden's[40] January 2022 decision to revoke the policy ensuring gender parity in the appointment of senior government officials, as well as the *"shocking"* 16 percent of women represented in Tunisia's 2022 parliament, compared to 31 percent in 2014; coupled with what she described as *"the persistent social reality of women's labour exploitation and patriarchal domination embedded within social institutions"* (Ibid), to evidence that women have not yet been economically empowered in Tunisia. In an article she penned for the *Carnegie Endowment* in March 2023, Ben Said also termed Bouden's senior government appointment as "plain façade and pure tokenism" (Ben Said 2023: para 5). This sentiment aligned with our conversation on state feminism, where Ben Said almost reminiscently noted that, for all its flaws, the state feminism of previous Tunisian presidents had at least contributed to advancing women's security and status (Ibid), with the current male-dominated government seeing its priorities lying elsewhere. This is also strikingly similar to former ATFD President Monia Ben Jemia's lamenting state feminism as *"a thing of the past"*, as I revealed in Chapter 6.

These dynamics strengthen the purpose and necessity of initiatives such as Tunisia's first women's political academy, *La Académie politique des femmes*, established by Ben Said in 2012, shortly after founding Aswat Nissa in 2011. Starting from "the premise that socio-economic inequality tends to reinforce political exclusion" (Debuysere 2017:197), Ben Said shared that the WPA was attempting to institutionalise the role of women in political spaces by equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed as leaders in their communities, as well

[40] Tunisia's first female government head, appointed in 2021.

as continue to transform the structural barriers hindering women's economic agency through multifaceted training programmes (Interview, 20 December 2024). This dual

focus exemplifies the WSECoP's role as a norm entrepreneur by reshaping the political landscape in Tunisia to prioritise economic and political empowerment for women, marking a profound shift in how Tunisian women engage with democratic and economic policymaking, bearing in mind that "genuine inclusive democracy requires that people's material needs are addressed" (Debuysere 2017:197). It also exemplifies Aswat Nissa itself as an epistemic community, through its recognised expertise in women's political and economic empowerment, influencing policy through authoritative knowledge claims (Dunlop 2011).

This section thus analyses the WPA as a potential site of norm entrepreneurship, reflecting its ambitions to foster systemic change in Tunisia's gendered political and economic structures. As the following empirical evidence illustrates, the WPA exemplified a multi-pronged approach to capacity-building, training, and policy engagement. However, as I will also discuss, the impact of this work was ultimately shaped by the entrenched patriarchal structures of Tunisia's broader political and institutional systems.

According to Aswat Nissa's website, the WPA's overarching goal was to ensure women's long-term political presence by enabling them to advocate for gendersensitive economic policies and promote women's rights in legislative and political spheres (Aswat Nissa n.d.). As detailed in seven impact assessment reports published by Aswat Nissa, between 2012 and 2019, the academy trained hundreds of women, with programmes attracting participants from diverse regions, such as Tozeur, Sfax, Bizerte, and Tunis. In light of Tunisia's upcoming October 2014 elections, these training sessions received increased attention starting from early 2014 (Ibid). To that end, the 2014–2015 cohort trained 25 women from five regions, organising their participation in sessions on leadership, local governance, and gender-based economic policy integration. Aswat Nissa's 2015 impact report on the WPA indicated that this emphasis on diversity and inclusion enabled participants to connect with their communities and advocate effectively for policies addressing local

women's economic needs (Aswat Nissa 2015). Further, the 2016 programme expanded to include 40 participants, preparing them for Tunisia's first municipal elections in 2017 and emphasising economic governance strategies such as genderresponsive budgeting to address women's economic security at the municipal level (Aswat Nissa 2014; Aswat Nissa 2015; Aswat Nissa 2016). By 2019, the academy was training 20 women for parliamentary elections, underscoring its role in consistently addressing women's evolving political needs and integrating economic reforms into political platforms (Ibid). This reflects the role of epistemic communities in fostering social learning, where knowledge was shared and refined in this case within a network of feminist actors.

The WPA's inclusivity was another hallmark of its success, as it engaged women with diverse political affiliations. An article published by *The World* on the WPA's 2017 session described the trainees as "a diverse mix of women sporting smartly tucked headscarves, brightly coloured blazers, and fitted jeans" (The World 2017: para 1). This approach mirrored the WSECoP's broader strategy of bridging ideological divides to create a unified front for feminist advocacy, thereby fostering a political culture where women's issues transcended partisan boundaries.

However, despite the WPA's extensive training and discursive attempts to challenge patriarchal norms within its curriculum, its transformative impact was ultimately curtailed by the broader political environment. When I questioned Ben Said about the legacies of state feminism in Tunisia, she reflected candidly on the paradoxes she encountered – *"It's true…under Ben Ali there was at least a structure, flawed, yes, but a structure. Now we have more freedom, but no real support, no institutional will"* (Interview, 20 December 2024). She described how the post-2011 period created new opportunities for feminist organising, but also exposed the fragility of women's rights once they were no longer backed by state discourse: *"We worked so hard inside the WPA, training women, debating laws, practising leadership… but then they get out there and face a wall"* (Ibid). One example she gave was of a participant who, after successfully completing the WPA's programme and standing as a candidate, faced dismissive remarks from her male party colleagues, who

accused her of being a *"quota candidate"* and discouraged her from taking visible leadership roles (Ibid). These reflections highlight how Aswat Nissa's work – though deeply committed to feminist transformation – still operated within a political ecosystem marked by the instrumentalisation and fragmentation of women's rights. Whilst the WPA succeeded in building leadership capacity and fostering civic engagement, it did so within a landscape that remained largely resistant to gender transformation at scale. In this way, the WPA reflected the paradox of norm entrepreneurship in post2011 Tunisia: it produced counter-hegemonic knowledge and practices, but struggled to dismantle the entrenched norms and power structures that constrained women's full participation.

Nonetheless, the WPA's curriculum embedded innovative approaches to leadership and policy-making. For example, a news report by the CBC noted that the WPA trained women to conduct electoral research, draft targeted campaigns, and mobilise voters – skills essential for addressing Tunisia's significant economic disparities and navigating Tunisia's complex political landscape (CBC News 2016). These efforts culminated in tangible successes, such as the election of several WPA graduates to municipal councils during Tunisia's first post-uprising municipal elections in 2018, who were then instrumental in integrating gender-responsive budgeting into local governance frameworks to boost local women's economic security (Ibid). According to Aswat Nissa's 2018 report, seven out of 20 participants from that year's cohort secured elected positions, illustrating the programme's effectiveness in preparing women for political leadership roles (Aswat Nissa 2018). This strategic capacitybuilding also aligns with Dunlop's (2017) view on epistemic communities as drivers of policy innovation, in light of Aswat Nissa's training and advocacy efforts, ensuring women are not only present in political spaces, but are also empowered to enact meaningful reforms.

The WPA also addressed socio-economic barriers that disproportionately hindered women's political and economic participation (CBC News 2016; Aswat Nissa 2015; Aswat Nissa 2016). For instance, workshops on corruption and transparency empowered participants to challenge systemic issues undermining economic

security and women's access to resources (Ibid). Moreover, the WPA's curriculum featured sessions on drafting gender-sensitive budgets, enabling participants to address economic disparities at local and national levels (Ibid). These initiatives resonate with the WSECoP's broader agenda of equipping women with the tools to combat socio-economic discrimination and promote inclusivity. In addition to these formal training sessions, the WPA also prioritised fostering connections amongst participants and between participants and seasoned politicians. As reported on Aswat Nissa's website, initiatives such as 'political salons' and networking events allowed participants to exchange experiences with female politicians from Tunisia, Europe, and Africa (Aswat Nissa n.d.). These interactions provided critical mentorship opportunities and addressed salient concerns amongst working Tunisian mothers, such as balancing careers with familial responsibilities, often cited as barriers to women's economic and political participation (Aswat Nissa 2018).

By attempting to embed gender-sensitive principles into Tunisia's political and economic systems, Aswat Nissa's academy demonstrated its commitment to reshaping the structures that limited women's roles in public life and framing women's political participation as a pathway to economic empowerment. It also demonstrated Aswat Nissa's role as an epistemic community that not only produces knowledges but also operationalises it within the political arena, reinforcing Antoniades' observation that epistemic communities are active political agents rather than abstract theorists (Antoniades 2003:37). Moreover, I want to posit here that, as argued in Chapter 6, the WPA also ties to the WSECoP's function as a 'guardian of the constitutional process', promoting civic engagement and ensuring accountability in Tunisia's evolving political landscape. As the intersectional feminist Audre Lorde observed whilst reflecting on 1960s America: "revolution…is becoming always vigilant for the smallest opportunity to make a genuine change in established, outgrown responses" (Lorde 1982). Similarly, the WSECoP's role as guardian of the constitutional process did not end with the promulgation of the 2014 Constitution; it continued to evolve through initiatives like Aswat Nissa's WPA, ensuring the democratic and economic empowerment of women in Tunisia. Indeed, Ben Said disclosed to me that she is most proud of how the WPA attempted to challenge the

patriarchal norms historically excluding women from both political and economic decision-making (Interview, 20 December 2024). By equipping women to succeed in elections and governance, the WPA ensured that feminist ideals were not merely theoretical, but were actualised within Tunisia's political and economic systems. As the CBC noted, graduates of the WPA like Karima Tagaz – a participant who later became a member of Tunisia's ARP where she famously exclaimed "women must dare to impose themselves in politics so as to take their rightful place" (CBA News 2016: para 15) – epitomised the WPA's mission to create "representatives of change" (CBC News, 2016).

Incidentally, as a peripheral point which I believe it is important to formulate, Ben Said's comments about the WPA's role in confronting entrenched cultural norms in Tunisia evidenced how Aswat Nissa's WPA addressed the intertwined dimensions of cultural recognition and political representation – two of Nancy Fraser's (1997, 2013) three dimensions of successful gender justice – within Tunisia's evolving sociopolitical landscape. Although it is outside the scope of this thesis to enter into the debate on gender justice theory, it is enough to point out that the WPA fostered *cultural recognition* by dismantling patriarchal stereotypes that historically confined women to subordinate roles. Through leadership training, public speaking workshops, and networking events with prominent female leaders, the WPA redefined societal perceptions of women's capabilities, promoting diverse representations of female leadership across Tunisia's political spectrum. Secondly, the WPA advanced *political representation* by preparing women to run for office and actively participate in governance structures. This was evident in the tangible success of WPA graduates, such as Tagaz, embodying the WPA's mission to institutionalise women's presence in politics. Consequently, by addressing these two dimensions, the WPA fostered individual empowerment alongside catalysing systemic change, positioning women as agents of transformation in Tunisia. At the same time, as Ben Said reflected in our interview, much of the feminist progress achieved *"within the four walls"* (Interview, 20 December 2024) of the WPA did not completely translate into entrenched institutional structures. This exposes the

structural limitations within which epistemic communities can cultivate alternative knowledge and practices, but struggle to overcome gendered hierarchies in practice.

AMAL Project

The AMAL project, implemented in Tunisia by ATFD and AFTURD, stands as a compelling example of the WSECoP's aspiring role as a norm entrepreneur in advancing women's economic security. AMAL, which translates to 'hope' in Arabic, was launched in 2014 and concluded in 2017, aiming to revitalise the economic agency and security of rural Tunisian women post-2011 (Oxfam 2018). According to a detailed effectiveness review report combining statistical data, case studies, and feedback from participants to measure AMAL's effectiveness, which was prepared by the British-founded poverty alleviation charity Oxfam in 2018, the project was facilitated and funded by Oxfam. This involved providing technical expertise and resources, as well as working closely alongside ATFD and AFTURD to design project activities (Ibid).

The issue of rural women's socio-economic marginalisation in Tunisia was not a new one, characterised by poor access to healthcare, limited educational opportunities, and exploitative labour conditions. Ben Ali's neoliberal economic policies, characterised by structural adjustment programs, privatisation, and market liberalisation, significantly exacerbated the socio-economic vulnerabilities of rural women in Tunisia (Debuysere 2017:198). However, these struggles were largely obscured by state propaganda that promoted an illusion of gender equality and touted Tunisia's progressive legal frameworks, like the CSP (Ibid:200).

The 2011 uprising marked a significant shift. As the veil of authoritarian control lifted, the extent of rural women's socio-economic hardships came to the fore. Rural women were not passive bystanders in the revolutionary fervour; they actively participated in protests, strikes, and sit-ins, demanding political freedom and – crucially – socio-economic justice (Ibid:201). Post-uprising, whilst Tunisia's democratic transition promised reforms, rural women continued to face systemic challenges. Reports indicate persistently high unemployment rates amongst rural

women, compounded by inadequate social protection and limited political representation. As highlighted by an ATFD report published in 2019, the agricultural sector remains exploitative, with female labourers still enduring unsafe working conditions, lack of legal protections, and meagre wages, reflecting the state's failure to integrate their voices into formal political and civil society activism effectively (ATFD 2019). Unsurprisingly, "whereas ATFD rarely dealt with rural women before the uprising, their situation has become more central in the association's recent activities. For one thing, the fall of the authoritarian regime has enabled ATFD to travel the country and reach out to the interior regions, with new ATFD sections set up in Bizerte, Sousse, Kairouan and Sfax" (Debuysere 2017:209). The post-uprising landscape thus witnessed the emergence of initiatives that sought to amplify rural women's demands, aiming to bridge the gap between formal feminist discourse – often dominated by urban, elite voices – and the lived realities of rural working-class women, such as AMAL.

AMAL sought to address the structural and systemic barriers hindering Tunisian women's economic participation, with a particular emphasis on empowering rural women and those from economically disadvantaged communities (Oxfam 2018). The project's overarching aim was to tackle unemployment and poverty through targeted capacity-building initiatives, grassroots mobilisation, and institutional advocacy, ultimately contributing to a normative shift in how women's economic roles were perceived and supported within Tunisian society. ATFD and AFTURD, who were sought out by Oxfam to serve as local project implementation partners in Tunisia, led efforts to redefine societal and institutional norms by embedding gender equity into local and national economic policies (Ibid). These organisations thus exemplified epistemic communities here, as their expertise was instrumental for Oxfam in generating knowledge about women's economic challenges and crafting policyrelevant solutions for AMAL. As I explained in Chapter 1, for Haas, epistemic communities function as "communities of experts" (Haas 1992a:16), whose "claims to knowledge serve as their primary social power resource" (Ibid) and accord them access to policymaking processes. Yet, despite these important contributions, the project ultimately operated within a broader developmentalist framework that

constrained its transformative potential. AMAL's objectives were ambitious, but its impact was shaped by institutional limitations, political volatility, and entrenched socio-economic structures.

According to Oxfam's assessment, ATFD and AFTURD leveraged their expertise and networks to implement a range of initiatives, including vocational training, financial literacy workshops, and micro-entrepreneurship programs, which were designed to equip rural women with the skills and resources needed to navigate the labour market (Oxfam 2018). By applying their specialised knowledge to address issues such as women's economic inclusion, ATFD and AFTURD served as trusted actors capable of bridging technical expertise with actionable policy recommendations. Oxfam's report indicated that ATFD and AFTURD enabled the implementation of these programmes with a focus on equipping women with essential skills tailored to local market demands, and in regions where women's participation was both feasible and needed (Ibid). For instance, in Sidi Bouzid, vocational training targeted unemployed women with skills in agriculture and food processing, sectors critical to the local economy. In Kairouan, the project introduced women to artisanal crafts, such as weaving and pottery, which had high potential for income generation (Ibid). Such targeted interventions reflected the WSECoP's capacity to adapt its strategies to the unique socio-economic realities of Tunisia's underprivileged regions. Oxfam's impact assessment revealed over 500 women to have benefitted from vocational training across both regions. Significantly, amongst the outcomes reported was also a 40 percent increase in employment rates for trained women in Sidi Bouzid, as well as a 35 percent rise in household income for participants in Kairouan (Ibid). These results were attributed to the programme's holistic approach, which combined technical training with market integration strategies, such as connecting women to cooperatives and local business networks. Additionally, 200 women in Sidi Bouzid and Kairouan received micro-loans, enabling them to launch small businesses (Ibid).

Moreover, the Oxfam report highlights that a defining feature of the AMAL project was its dedication to grassroots mobilisation, which served to empower local women to advocate for their economic rights and challenge entrenched gender norms (Ibid).

In particular, AFTURD was spotlighted by Oxfam to have played a key role in the project's community's engagement efforts. Perceptibly, AFTURD's community workshops underscore the distinctiveness of the WSECoP as an *epistemic* CoP, where knowledge is not only generated but also practiced, embodied, and shared through deliberate actions that combine feminist advocacy, expert knowledge production, and collaborative engagement with policymakers and local communities. AFTURD also organised 50 community workshops that brought together women, local authorities, and civil society actors to discuss the barriers to women's economic participation and co-develop solutions, which were attended by over 1,000 women across nine regions, including Sidi Bouzid and Kairouan. These workshops not only amplified women's voices in local governance and raised awareness about economic rights, but also fostered a sense of collective agency, enabling participants to see themselves as active contributors to their communities' development and provided women with actionable strategies for overcoming socio-economic challenges (Ibid).

As Adler and Faubert note, communities of practice go beyond simple transfers of ideas to focus on "practices as the socially significant patterns of interaction" (Adler and Faubert 2022:50) that generate and reify knowledge within specific cultural and institutional contexts. In the case of AMAL, ATFD and AFTURD not only embodied many features of a CoP through their participatory methods and local engagement, but also exemplified an epistemic CoP by producing policy-relevant knowledge, advocating for systemic reforms, and contributing to the co-creation of gendersensitive economic policies. Further, AFTURD's emphasis on participatory methods allowed women to articulate their needs and propose solutions, which were then integrated into broader project strategies. For example, women in these workshops identified a lack of childcare facilities as a significant barrier to economic participation. In response, AFTURD advocated for childcare services in rural development plans, an initiative that saw pilot childcare facilities established in three regions by 2016 (Ibid). This focus on participatory methods highlights how the WSECoP's practices brought local culture, knowledge, and interaction into play, bridging the divide between grassroots and institutional levels. The workshops also

had a transformative impact on participants' self-perception and agency. AFTURD's evaluation reports highlighted that 80 percent of workshop participants reported increased confidence in advocating for their rights, whilst 65 percent became actively involved in local economic initiatives or cooperatives (Ibid). These results underscore the WSECoP's ability to mobilise communities and bridge the gap between grassroots activism and institutional advocacy. Additionally, the grassroots activism catalysed by AMAL underscores the WSECoP's function as a facilitator of norm diffusion, whereby new ideas about women's roles in the economy were introduced and equally actively normalised within local contexts. This underscores how the WSECoP operated at the intersection of feminist activism, knowledge production, and institutional transformation in Tunisia, positioning AFTURD and ATFD as key epistemic agents in Tunisia's post-2011 socio-political context.

Moreover, AMAL also featured an advocacy dimension. ATFD and AFTURD used the project's findings to engage in policy dialogues with government officials and international organisations, advocating for structural reforms that would institutionalise gender-sensitive economic policies (Ibid). This advocacy reflected the broader function of the WSECoP in institutionalisation, where collective understandings generated within the community were "dissipated beyond their original boundaries and selectively retained" (Adler and Faubert 2022:52) in governance frameworks. For example, through AMAL, ATFD leveraged project data to integrate gender-responsive budgeting into local governance frameworks. Working closely with municipal councils in Tunis, Kairouan, and Sidi Bouzid, ATFD used AMAL's data on women's economic challenges to advocate for budget allocations prioritising women's employment and economic development (Oxfam 2018). ATFD also collaborated with Tunisia's MFFES in 2015 to ensure that funds were allocated for vocational training centres and women-owned cooperatives in rural areas (Ibid). These efforts marked a significant step towards institutionalising gender equity in economic governance and highlighted the WSECoP's ability to influence policy through evidence-based advocacy and strategic partnerships.

The impact of AMAL's initiatives on rural women's economic security in Tunisia was significant. By the project's conclusion, Oxfam reported that over 3,000 women had

directly benefited from its activities, including training, micro-loans, and community workshops (Ibid). Additionally, the project fostered systemic change by embedding gender equity principles into local development plans and governance structures. Surveys conducted by Oxfam revealed that 70 percent of participants reported improved economic conditions and improved access to employment opportunities, with 60 percent noting increased economic independence and household decisionmaking power (Ibid). Moreover, the project's emphasis on financial literacy and entrepreneurship led to the establishment of numerous small businesses run by women, which not only boosted household incomes but also challenged societal perceptions of rural women's economic capabilities (Ibid). Through initiatives like AMAL, the WSECoP reinforced its commitment to advancing women's economic security and ensuring that gender equity remained a cornerstone of Tunisia's democratic transition.

However, it was also the case that, as ATFD and AFTURD attempted to integrate gender-responsive budgeting and advocate for rural development policy reform, they encountered institutional inertia. Municipal authorities often lacked the resources or political will to absorb feminist policy recommendations into planning frameworks. This reflects the broader challenge the WSECoP faced when working within a system limiting its reach: although these organisations functioned as epistemic communities – producing credible, relevant, and participatory knowledge – their ability to institutionalise that knowledge faced external political and structural barriers. One particularly telling insight came from Ben Jemia, who was serving as ATFD's President during AMAL's implementation. In a follow-up phone call arranged in January 2025 to discuss this project after our initial discussion in October 2024, she considered the *"disconnect between what we trained women to do and what the local authorities were prepared to support"* (Interview, 17 January 2025). This illustrates the wider phenomenon of epistemic communities working within systems that limit their reach: their capacity to produce knowledge is not in question, but their ability to institutionalise that knowledge faces external political and structural barriers. Ben Jemia referred specifically to the workshops led by AFTURD, which she confirmed brought women into dialogue with local officials, creating rare spaces for rural women to voice their experiences and demands. Yet, she described these

spaces as *"symbolic rather than system-changing"*, although participants later joined cooperatives or led small businesses, such changes were *"heavily dependent on ongoing external support"* (Ibid). Thus, AMAL represents a case where norm entrepreneurship was visible in intention, language, and community engagement – but limited in structural outcome. It exemplifies the WSECoP's strategic innovation and resilience, but also highlights the persistent gap between feminist knowledge production and entrenched socio-political hierarchies.

Building upon scholars such as Voorhoeve (2021), who describe Tunisia's women's organisations as part of "a dynamic civil society influencing Tunisia's socio-political landscape" (Voorhoeve 2021:384), and Martin (2020), who argues that Tunisian CSOs, including ATFD and AFTURD, "performed a democratising function" (Martin 2020:10) after the uprising, the activities undertaken through AMAL demonstrate that they also functioned as epistemic communities within a broader epistemic CoP. Whilst Voorhoeve's characterisation usefully captures their activism, and whilst many of Martin's insights regarding Tunisian CSOs' roles in fostering democratic oversight, accountability, and civic political culture are significant and accurate, by framing economic empowerment as a foundational element of gender equality and linking it to Tunisia's democratic aspirations, ATFD and AFTURD exemplified the defining characteristics of epistemic communities – namely, their ability to use specialised knowledge to influence normative and policy changes. This perspective highlights the added value of viewing these organisations through the lens of epistemic communities, as it brings into focus their capacity to act as norm entrepreneurs who shaped both societal attitudes and institutional practices, as well as received facilitated access to the political system by virtue of their prestige and expertise. Viewing them also as an epistemic CoP highlights the performative aspect of their activities, where shared practices, deliberations, and collaborations were central to constructing and transforming norms around women's economic participation.

8.2.2 The WSECoP's Policy Advocacy and Reform Facilitation

As this thesis has attempted to demonstrate since Chapter 5, the post-2011 period in Tunisia marked a transformative phase for Tunisia's women's organisations, as organisations such as ATFD and AFTURD expanded their roles beyond traditional

advocacy to actively shaping and implementing projects aimed at women's economic empowerment. This section below focuses on two pivotal initiatives led by AFTURD – the Jendouba Solidarity Center and the economic solidarity project with the women of El Feija National Park – which exemplify the WSECoP's post-2011 function as a policy advocacy and reform facilitator. By focusing on these projects, this analysis underscores how AFTURD evolved from a research-centric organisation during the Ben Ali era, into a dynamic actor capable of bridging grassroots activism with policymaking.

The empirical examples selected here also clearly demonstrate how epistemic communities such as AFTURD were part of the wider WSECoP amongst Tunisia's women's organisations, in this instance catalysed by their joint efforts and shared practices in response to the practical challenge of bettering rural women lives. This is borne out for example by ATFD's launch of the Asma Fanni Observatory in Ben Arous in 2011, which focused on the rights of the most marginalised women (Debuysere 2017:209), highlighting the intersectional challenges faced by rural women, and fomenting the subsequent initiatives by AFTURD detailed below (Ibid).

AFTURD's Rural Women's Economic Empowerment Initiatives

AFTURD demonstrated a consistent policy advocacy and reform facilitation function in relation to women's economic security, similar to the role it played in advancing women's physical security outlined in Chapter 7. As revealed by a 2022 interview between AFTURD's former President (2013 – 2019) Salwa Kennou and the Tunisian researcher Olfa Belhassine, Kennou's leadership was instrumental in shaping AFTURD's new post-uprising trajectory.[41] Elected as AFTURD's president in 2013,

Kennou's background in agricultural engineering and her deep connection to rural communities informed the organisation's strategic focus on economic rights as a pathway to rural women's empowerment (Belhassine 2022). According to Belhassine, she was elected to lead AFTURD due to her early experiences in the

[41] I attempted to arrange an interview with Kennou myself after receiving her email from Khedija Arfaoui, another one of my interviewees. However, Kennou did not respond to my emails, likely a result of AFTURD's dissolution in 2023 as discussed in Chapter 7.

rural areas of Tunisia, coupled with her academic career in agricultural education, which provided her with a unique perspective on the socio-economic challenges faced by rural women (Ibid). Under her presidency, AFTURD first announced the organisation's intention to integrate economic initiatives with broader feminist goals, recognising that financial independence is crucial for women's autonomy and resilience against violence (Ibid). This strategic shift exemplifies AFTURD's epistemic role as a key policy advocacy and reform facilitator, as it sought to influence economic policies and promote gender-sensitive economic reforms.

To this effect, AFTURD launched the Jendouba Solidarity Centre (JSC) in May 2012, which remained operational until June 2014. According to an international organisational activity report published by AFTURD, the centre was established with the support of the Cooperation for the Development of Emerging Countries (COSPE) and several local partners, including the Women's Association for Development and Citizenship, the Rural Women's Association, and the Women's Commission of the UGTT (AFTURD 2016). JSC reportedly aimed to combat the social, economic, and cultural marginalisation of women in the peripheral areas of the Jendouba Governorate, northwestern Tunisia, with its objectives focusing on strengthening the social and economic roles of women in precarious situations through associative networking and support for women-led micro-enterprises in the social and solidarity economy sector (Ibid). The establishment of JSC was not merely an isolated project; it represented the first stage of AFTURD's broader policy advocacy strategy to institutionalise gender-sensitive economic policies and promote systemic reforms addressing rural women's economic exclusion (Ibid).

In 2014, JSC was subsumed into a broader multipurpose centre serving northwestern Tunisia named 'Rayhana',[42] inaugurated by AFTURD in October 2014.

Designed by the organisation to be an open, active hub, Rayhana facilitated networking, civic participation, technical and vocational training, and provided a platform for dialogue and support for women's groups across this region of the

[42] 'Rayhan' is the Arabic word for the herb plant basil. 'Rayhana' is an Arabic female given name meaning 'sweet basil'.

country. As detailed by AFTURD's organisational report, the centre became a vibrant space for women to access resources, share experiences, and build solidarity networks. The project's activities were comprehensive, including training workshops on gender and citizenship, awareness campaigns on women's social, economic, and legal rights, and the establishment of micro-enterprises (Ibid). AFTURD's operating as an epistemic community was showcased here in its participatory action research approach, which involved local women in identifying sensitive areas, potential economic activities, and groups to be supported. This research-driven methodology informed the development of targeted interventions, ensuring that the initiatives were contextually relevant and sustainable. More importantly, Rayhana became a platform for policy advocacy, where the insights gathered from grassroots activities were channelled into policy dialogues, influencing local governance and development strategies to be more inclusive of women's economic rights (Ibid).

The work being undertaken at Rayhana also facilitated the creation of two women's associations in El Feija, a rural area in Jendouba, focused on income-generating activities for rural women: "Hraier El Feija for Economic Self-Development",[43] and "Women of El Feija for Development" (Ibid). Kennou revealed during her interview with Belhassine that these associations, which she herself oversaw, engaged in ecotourism, agroforestry, artisanal soap making, beekeeping, and the production of aromatic and medicinal plants (Belhassine 2022). Notable events organised by AFTURD and these associations included the "Green Day with the Women of El Feija", held on 27 December 2014 at El Feija National Park (AFTURD 2016). This exhibition and sale showcased products created by the women's associations, enhancing their visibility and market access. Additionally, a study tour to Morocco in March 2015 facilitated knowledge exchange on women's cooperatives in the social and solidarity economy, illustrating AFTURD's role in advocating for systemic reforms in Tunisia's economic governance structures to support women's entrepreneurship; alongside the epistemic CoP dynamic, where learning and best practices are shared across borders.

[43] 43 'Hraier' is the Arabic term for 'free women'.

It is important to also highlight that AFTURD's commitment to feminist research remained central in the post-2011 period, even as it expanded its practical initiatives. This was exemplified by the AFTURD-COSPE joint project titled 'Jendouba Action Research', the details of which were discussed by AFTURD's organisational report. This project, conducted between 2014 and 2015, was embedded within the broader framework of Rayhana (AFTURD 2016). The research team, comprising prominent figures within Tunisia's feminist landscape such as Kennou, Dorra Mahfoudh, and Radhia Belhaj Zekri,[44] joined by an activist research team from ATFD, as well as doctoral candidates from Tunisia and Europe, embodied a transnational collaboration that enriched the project's scope and depth (Ibid). I questioned Dorra about this project during our interview, which was conducted entirely in Arabic as it was the only language she spoke alongside French. Due to recent decline in her health, our interview was brief, but she stated that both herself and her daughter Amel Mahfoudh were invited to contribute to this AFTURD project in 2014 (Interview, 17 August 2024). Dorra decided to participate, impressed by what she described as AFTURD's efforts to bridge the gap between feminist research and real change for women (Ibid), which I interpreted in a nutshell to refer to *'feminist-action research'*. This reveals that although AFTURD did indeed continue to carry out research activities, its empirical investigations were now linked to a more activist engagement agenda, in line also with the similar action-oriented research initiatives longundertaken by ATFD, discussed in Chapter 4.

The report produced by AFTURD revealed that the Jendouba Action Research project's methodology was rooted in participatory principles, involving around forty women from diverse backgrounds in Jendouba through a "snowball" recruitment process (AFTURD 2016). As AFTURD explained, this inclusive approach ensured that the research was not only *about* rural women, but also conducted *with* rural women as active subjects, recognising their lived experiences as valuable

[44] Zekri was AFTURD's President in 2012, before leaving the organisation and accepting a role within Tunisia's Ministry of Education.

knowledge, with the project's overarching aims involving the deconstruction of patriarchal norms and fostering a local associative dynamic around women's rights and youth empowerment (Ibid). The culmination of this work was the publication of "Women of Jendouba: Action Research on Inclusion and Solidarity Practices" in December 2015, a 40-page document that captured the project's findings and experiences (Ibid). Drawing from the CoPs literature, this project exemplifies how AFTURD and its partners, as "like-minded groups of practitioners bound by a shared interest in learning and applying a common practice" (Bicchi 2023:5) created a shared learning environment on rural women in Tunisia, intertwining continuous dialogue, collective learning, and the co-creation of strategies.

According to AFTURD's report, the outcomes of the Jendouba Action Research project were significant, a sentiment also imparted by Dorra. The project strengthened the established cooperative links between researchers from AFTURD and ATFD, as well as forged new ones between independent researchers, local women's groups, and various civil society actors, laying the groundwork for future projects (Ibid; Interview, 17 August 2024). The project also contributed to a solid understanding of gendered social practices in Jendouba, providing a foundation for AFTURD and other organisations to develop targeted interventions (AFTURD 2016). By adopting 'feminist-action research', AFTURD thus not only advanced scholarly knowledge, but also actively engaged in transforming social realities, reinforcing its role as both an epistemic community actively engaged in knowledge production, policy advocacy, and practical intervention, as well as a catalyst for socio-political change. This aligns with Wenger's (1998) conceptualisation of CoPs as spaces where members "learn how to do what they do better and in a more meaningful way" (Howard 2019:498), through shared experiences and reflective practices. AFTURD's integration of research and activism in Jendouba epitomises this dynamic, demonstrating how feminist organisations can leverage CoPs frameworks to sustain impactful and localised knowledge-driven advocacy. This integration highlights the epistemic nature of this CoP, through AFTURD's deliberate efforts to generate, disseminate, and apply feminist knowledge to policy reform, ensuring that its

advocacy was both evidence-based and strategically aligned with broader WSECoP goals.

8.3 The WSECoP and Equal Inheritance

As discussed in Chapter 2, Tunisia's legal framework governing inheritance has historically been rooted in Islamic jurisprudence, with the CSP maintaining Shariabased principles since its promulgation in 1956. Under these rules, male heirs generally receive double the share of their female counterparts, with this legal disparity persisting even following 2011, deeply embedded in both religious and cultural norms. Notably, even secular political parties, including President Essebsi's Nidaa Tounes – which secured a plurality of seats following the October 2014 parliamentary elections as stated in Chapter 7 – have refrained from challenging these inheritance laws, reflecting the sensitivity and complexity surrounding this issue within Tunisia's socio-political landscape (Debuysere 2017:234).

However, for the women's organisations under study here, the fight for equal inheritance rights has been a cornerstone of their broader struggle for women's security in Tunisia. This was cogently articulated by Sana Ben Achour, a Tunisian lawyer, activist, and one of the founding members of ATFD. In a 2023 interview with the Tunisian Observatory of Food Sovereignty and the Environment (OSAE), Ben Achour stated, *"If I have to devote what remains of my life to one initiative, it would be equality in inheritance… amongst the economic rights that people don't understand is equality in inheritance. Women in Tunisia are the poorest, they have been squeezed out of all capital for thousands of years. We have no capital, we only have our labour force and I have experienced it myself. As soon as a woman is sick, or has ups and downs in life, or has important needs to be taken care of, as soon as she stops working or being paid, it's her downfall because she only has her salary to rely upon and her ability to work... they forget that"* (OSAE 2023).

This is not a perspective held by women belonging to Tunisia's Islamist parties. According to the gender researcher Loes Debuysere, "Islamist women's rights activists believe women and men have complementary, instead of absolute equal,

roles within the family…due to biological differences" (Debuysere 2017:156). This was also discussed in Chapter 4 of this thesis, when Monia Ben Jemia, the former President of ATFD (2016–2018), described how *"Ennahda was OK with gender equality in the public sphere, but not within the private realm, particularly regarding family matters"* (Interview, 20 October 2024).

Consequently, as Chapter 4 also underscored, it is ATFD and AFTURD who have long been at the forefront of campaigns advocating for inheritance equality in Tunisia. In the post-2011 context, ATFD and AFTURD continued to exemplify the WSECoP's capacity to act as both a norm entrepreneur and a policy advocacy and reform facilitator concerning the divisive issue of equal inheritance. This role was evident through their sustained campaigns, scholarly research, and strategic advocacy efforts aimed at dismantling entrenched gender inequalities in Tunisia's inheritance laws, demonstrating their ability to bridge grassroots activism with institutional policymaking processes.

Building on the joint publications between AFTURD and CME-95 described in Chapter 4, in early 2014 AFTURD launched a pivotal project focused on inheritance equality (AFTURD 2021:37). This project culminated in AFTURD's 2014 publication titled *Égalité dans l'héritage et autonomie économique des femmes* ('Equality in Inheritance and Economic Autonomy for Women'), produced collaboratively with CME-95 and supported by UN Women (Ibid). The research team, which included influential feminist scholars and activists such as Dorra Mahfoudh, aimed to investigate the intersection between inheritance equality and women's economic empowerment (Ibid:38). The publication highlighted the evolving socio-economic roles of Tunisian women, who increasingly bear the financial responsibilities of their families, often as sole providers. This multidisciplinary study encompassed legal analyses, economic assessments, and quantitative surveys of over 1000 Tunisians from both urban and rural areas, underscoring the economic costs of inheritance inequality, the transformative contributions of women to family wealth, and the dissonance between contemporary family dynamics and archaic inheritance laws,

thus reinforcing the need for legal reforms aligned with Tunisia's constitutional principles of equality (Ibid).

When I questioned Dorra about the wider impact of this project, as well as the similar efforts undertaken along the years by both AFTURD and ATFD, she stated that these scholarly efforts significantly influenced political discourse, a view also shared by Ben Jemia, who confirmed that they drew the attention of some political parties (Interview, 17 August 2024; Interview 28 October 2024). Indeed, an ATFD publication from 2021 revealed that in 2016, the Republican Party's ARP deputy Mehdi Ben Gharbia proposed a draft law advocating for inheritance equality (ATFD 2021:44).[45] Supported initially by 27 deputies, the bill was reviewed by the Social Affairs Committee of the ARP. The momentum grew on 13 August 2017, when Essebsi, in a landmark speech on Tunisia's National Women's Day, announced the establishment of the Individual Freedoms and Equality Committee (known in Tunisian policy circles as 'COLIBE') (Ibid). This committee was tasked with drafting a legislative proposal to institutionalise gender equality in inheritance. Debuysere has attributed Essebsi's move in part to the influence of Saïda Garrach, a former ATFD member and presidential spokesperson, who "played a major role in convincing the president behind the scenes" (Debuysere 2017:265), leveraging the extensive network and advocacy expertise of her former organisation, ATFD, to influence public opinion and political stakeholders (Ibid).

Nonetheless, in response to "a long series of (very) heated debates in parliament in order to convince both secular and Islamist actors" (Ibid),[46] a coalition of 88 civil society organizations, led by ATFD and AFTURD, was formed in 2018 to advocate once again for inheritance equality (ATFD 2021:44). This coalition organized a historic national march on 10 March 2018, complemented by its co-authored publication *Twenty Arguments for Inheritance Equality*, which exerted considerable

[45] The Republican Party of Tunisia, known in Arabic as *Al-Joumhouri*, is a centrist political party formed in April 2012 through the merger of the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), Afek Tounes, and several other smaller parties. It positions itself as secular and liberal. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, it received only 1.6% of the vote and gained one seat in the ARP. Despite this, it continued to be active in Tunisia's political scene.

[46] The ARP website only features plenary sessions of the current sitting 2023 – 2027 parliament and earlier records are not accessible through the ARP website or the National Archives of Tunisia website. I reached out to ARP's administrative offices to inquire about accessing historical records but did not receive a response. Therefore, I was not able to examine the content of these debates during my research.

pressure on policymakers (Ibid). This document updated the socio-legal discourse on women's inheritance and reinforced the urgency of legislative reform, providing a robust policy framework that highlighted economic, legal, and cultural arguments for reform (Ibid).

On 12 June 2018, COLIBE released its report recommending amendments to Tunisia's CSP to establish inheritance equality, which Ben Jemia claimed was *"heavily influenced by our own 'Twenty Arguments'"* (Interview, 28 October 2024). She further revealed that this report ignited fervent public debates, as well as alleged that conservative factions launched disinformation campaigns to undermine the proposed reforms, stating that *"for the law on violence [Law 58] we [secular and Islamist women] were largely able to reconcile our points of views…but here the differences became apparent…our differences were not resolved"* (Ibid). Nonetheless, President Essebsi reaffirmed his commitment to inheritance equality on 13 August 2018, announcing his intention to submit a legislative initiative to the ARP, which a draft law formally introduced on 23 November 2018 (ATFD 2021:44). To galvanize public and parliamentary support for the draft law, ATFD subsequently organized an international mock tribunal on 08 March 2019, symbolically prosecuting the systemic injustice faced by women due to inheritance inequality (Ibid). Attended by 300 participants, this tribunal provided a platform for victims and activists to share personal narratives, linking inheritance discrimination to broader patriarchal structures that marginalize women from economic resources and decision-making power. Although *"the bill was eventually buried when parliament was frozen and then dissolved in 2021"* (Interview, 28 October 2024), ATFD's efforts in mobilizing both national support for the cause highlighted its strategic advocacy capabilities and its central role in Tunisia's feminist movement.

More generally, these initiatives by ATFD and AFTURD arguably underscored their sustained roles as norm entrepreneurs and policy advocacy leaders around women's equal inheritance in Tunisia. They also illustrated their operating as an epistemic CoP, where advocacy is not merely a strategy but a dynamic process of learning, knowledge production, and identity formation. Through collaborative research, public

mobilization, and legislative advocacy, these organisations have continuously navigated Tunisia's contested political landscape, challenging gender norms and advancing democratic governance. Their work also exemplifies how epistemic communities operate within power-laden environments, where the production and dissemination of knowledge are inextricably linked to struggles for social justice and gender equality, making advocacy itself a practice – a site where learning, identity formation, and knowledge production occur simultaneously, fostering resilience and adaptability within Tunisia's evolving democratic framework. Furthermore, the specific and wide-ranging activities undertaken by the WSECoP in this domain – including producing comprehensive research studies, influencing legislative processes through policy papers and lobbying, organising mass mobilisations, and creating platforms for public debate and feminist discourse – demonstrate that these organisations were actively engaged in generating, curating, and disseminating feminist knowledge, positioning themselves as authoritative voices in Tunisia's sociolegal discourse. This evidences why they cannot be seen only as 'normal' CSOs, as their influence extended beyond grassroots activism to shaping national policy and legal frameworks through informed, knowledge-based advocacy, recognising them also as epistemic communities engaged in an epistemic CoP in the Tunisian context.

8.3.1 'After State Feminism' and Tunisia's Inheritance Equality Debate

The debate over equal inheritance in Tunisia, encompassing both the achievements and setbacks experienced by the WSECoP in the pre- and post-2011 periods and illustrated both in this chapter and Chapter 4, cannot be fully understood without situating it within the broader historico-cultural-political context of Tunisia, a context unsurprisingly deeply intertwined with the country's state feminism and its inherent ambiguities. This debate has consistently reinforced the contradictions embedded in Tunisia's approach to women's security, reflecting the complex interplay between progressive legal reforms, political opportunism, and the instrumentalisation of women's rights for regime legitimacy, themes also thoroughly explored in Chapters 5,6,7,8, and 9. Whilst the Essebsi and Saeid administrations did not explicitly adopt "state feminism" in the form institutionalised under Ben Ali, the logic of selectively

deploying women's rights to relieve political pressure and project modernity persisted. These regimes may not have invoked the same official discourse, but their use of gender as a symbolic resource reflects a continuity in Tunisia's political *modus operandi*. The discussion that follows suggests that this could be understood as *post-authoritarian state instrumentalism* – introduced in Chapter 7 as a continuation of state feminism's performative dimension, without its formal structures. In other words, women's rights are mobilised as a reputational and coalition-building resource at moments of political strain, rather than as the product of sustained policy learning or co-governance with feminist actors. This analytical move links the historical and contemporary treatment of women's security in Tunisia, showing how gender remains a political tool even in supposedly democratic contexts.

The 2017 declaration by President Essebsi to reform the CSP and advocate for inheritance equality was, arguably, less a product of genuine concern for advancing women's economic security, and more a strategic manoeuvre tied to the ongoing political crisis being faced by his party, Nidaa Tounes. This dynamic mirrors the strategies employed by Ben Ali, who, as previously detailed, often leveraged women's rights to consolidate his regime's legitimacy both domestically and internationally. The political opportunism of Essebsi's actions in 2017 becomes even more apparent when considering the broader lacklustre women's rights record under the Nidaa Tounes-led government (Debuysere 2017:234). A telling example of this contradiction is Essebsi's dismissive remark during an October 2014 television interview on the Tunisian *El Wataniya* ('The Patriot') channel, where he trivialised criticism against his party from Meherzia Laabidi, an Ennahda representative, by stating, *"shnu besh nqulik, mra"* ("what can I say, she is just a woman") (Ibid:141; Webdo TN 2014).[47] This incident underscores the persistence of patriarchal attitudes across Tunisia's political spectrum, irrespective of ideological affiliations. Essebsi's paternalistic tone invoked the performative feminist discourses perpetuated under Ben Ali, highlighting how the ideal of 'la Femme Tunisienne' remains mired in symbolic representation, rather than substantive political empowerment. Indeed,

[47] On 26 August 2014, Laabidi had described Nidaa Tounes as a 'non-democratic party' in the *Akher Khabar* ('Latest News') newspaper, expressing her wariness towards working with a party "that collaborated with the former regime" (Webdo TN 2014).

Essebsi's remarks at the time reportedly came as a surprise to some, "especially since he never ceased to praise the modernist and progressive project, the Personal Status Code, and his respect for the women's cause" (Webdo TN 2014). In this way, Essebsi mirrored the rhetorical strategies employed by Ben Ali, who as explored in Chapter 3 frequently cited the CSP as a symbol of Tunisia's modernity, whilst simultaneously suppressing independent feminist activism and maintaining patriarchal structures that limited women's genuine political participation. Read against this record, the 2017 pivot looks less like a normative conversion and more like a tactical reframing aimed at re-energising urban middle-class women and signalling distance from Ennahda.

Furthermore, Essebsi's August 2015 Women's Day speech, where he explicitly stated that the time was not right to establish equal inheritance laws (Debuysere 2017:142), illustrates the selective and strategic nature of his post-authoritarian state instrumentalism. Instead of addressing the pressing issue of inheritance inequality, he diverted attention towards improving labour conditions for rural women and banning veiling in primary schools, thus avoiding contentious reforms that might alienate conservative constituencies, following the power-sharing agreement enacted between Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda in February 2015 (Ibid; Rand 2016). This approach reflects state feminism's enduring legacy, often employed to serve broader political agendas rather than to effect transformative change. Certainly, as remarked by Debuysere, "the new alliance between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes will reinforce all ambiguities intrinsic to 'la Femme': on the one hand, the Nidaa Tounesdominated government will not address remaining stumbling blocks for effective gender equality (e.g. equal rules of inheritance), nor will they make strong concessions towards the Islamists in government (e.g. concerning the veil)" (Debuysere 2017:152). Evidently, the anticipated deconstruction of 'la Femme Tunisienne' did not materialise following the uprising. Its persistence can be explained in light of this thesis' discussion in Chapter 3, linking its continuity to its deep-rooted connection with the broader truth regime of 'Tunisianité'. As an ideal imbued with meanings that appeal across ideological divides, small adjustments and concessions by political elites have entrenched the image of 'La Femme' in Tunisia.

Against that backdrop, the sudden embrace of inheritance reform in 2017 functioned as agenda control: it re-centred public debate on “progressive” identity, crowding out coverage of party splits and economic malaise, and repositioning the presidency as the custodian of women’s rights.

Accordingly, it is consistent with hegemonic trends in Tunisia’s history to interpret the perceived ‘volte-face’ in Essebsi's stance on inheritance equality in 2017 as a calculated response to the declining political influence of Nidaa Tounes. The party’s internal fragmentation, triggered by leadership conflicts in 2016 between former party secretary Mohsen Marzouk and Hafedh Caid Essebsi, Essebsi’s son and Nidaa Tounes’ vice president, significantly weakened its parliamentary dominance, inadvertently amplifying Ennahda’s influence within the ruling coalition (Debuysere 2017:235). Marzouk’s subsequent formation of offspring party *Mashrou’ Tounes* (‘Tunisia Project’) and his overt attempts to mobilise female voters underscore the instrumental role women play as a political constituency in Tunisia. His assertion in January 2016 that “if it was true that one million women voted for Nidaa Tounes…our new political party will easily attain more than one million and a half” (Ibid; Kapitalis 2016) reflects a continuity with Ben Ali’s discursive mobilisation strategies, where women’s support was courted as a means to bolster political legitimacy without corresponding commitments to gender parity within party leadership structures.

Both Nidaa Tounes and later Mashrou’ Tounes thusly perpetuated post-authoritarian state instrumentalism, undoubtedly inherited from Benalist-era top-down, authoritarian feminist projects. Whilst women remained pivotal in political mobilisation, their roles were largely confined to symbolic representation, with genuine political participation and leadership opportunities systematically curtailed. This pattern underscores the persistent ambivalence surrounding ‘la Femme Tunisienne’, a discursive construction celebrated as a symbol of modernity and progress, yet consistently marginalised within the corridors of political power, as Chapter 3 argued. The WSECoP’s advocacy for inheritance equality thus continually operated within this fraught landscape, where feminist gains were continually negotiated, contested, and co-opted by state-driven agendas. In sum, Essebsi’s

2017 shift on inheritance is best read as a tactical attempt to differentiate, regroup, and internationalise legitimacy – an “after state-feminism” play that echoes Ben Ali’s use of headline reforms to offset political vulnerability, even as day-to-day party practice and coalition management left patriarchal structures intact.

8.3.2 The Current State of the Inheritance Equality Debate

The issue of equal inheritance, which as Ben Jemia revealed was eventually frozen under Essebsi’s presidency, has not yet been formally taken up by Tunisia’s current President Kais Saied, elected in October 2019, “who seems to frame it in the opposition between bourgeois feminism and popular reality” (CeSPI 2022:23), as one report prepared by the Italian Foreign Ministry revealed. However, in the words of Ben Achour, *“when we demand equality in inheritance, they come and tell us it’s a bourgeois demand, but that’s not true at all. The bourgeois women manage just fine because they are bourgeois and there are assets to divide. But when there are no significant assets to divide – just a plot of land, a few fruit trees, some fig trees – women are completely excluded from property through unequal inheritance”* (OSAE 2023). In his own Women’s Day speech in 2020, Saied “clarified the need to establish socio-economic equality between the sexes before addressing the issue of inheritance, and that in fact, the precision of the provisions contained in the Qur’an on this matter leaves no room for interpretation for a reform of inheritance law in favour of women” (CeSPI 2022:23).

It is thus unsurprising that discrimination has been strengthened within Tunisian public and institutional opinion under the current administration. In 2019, only 28 percent of Tunisians signalled support for a reform of the inheritance law, with Arab Barometer polls of Tunisian society between July 2020 and March 2021 indicating widespread thinking that the roles of women and men should not be equal in the public or private spheres, and over half of respondents concurring that women ‘belonged in the home’ (Ibid:13). Such ideas have only become more mainstream since Saied dismissed the Prime Minister and dissolved the ARP in July 2021, ostensibly due to the political deadlock and intensifying social unrest stemming from the escalating COVID-19 health crisis, which marked the onset of a new chapter in

Tunisia's post-uprising political trajectory, characterised by governance through decree-laws (Ibid:22). This shift towards authoritarianism culminated in Saied's annulment of the 2014 Constitution and the adoption of a new constitutional framework, which officially came into effect on 16 August 2022.

Compared to the 2014 Constitution, the new constitution poses potential threats to previously secured gains to women's security. For instance, Article 5 asserts that Tunisia is part of the Muslim community and that the state is responsible for upholding the objectives of Islam, arguably leaving room for interpretations that could undermine civil liberties, particularly those related to women's security (Ibid:23). It also repealed Article 46 of the 2014 Constitution which mandated gender parity in elected bodies. As a result, it was termed a "one-sided product" by Aswat Nissa in
2022, which criticised the constitutional drafting process for its lack of inclusivity (Ibid). Additionally, backlash from women's organisations following Saied's announcement of the state of emergency caused him to appoint a woman –Najla Bouden – as head of government in September 2021, garnering significant international attention (Ibid:22). Whilst Bouden's appointment marked a historic milestone as the first female prime minister in the Arab world, it was also criticised by a coalition of women's organisations including Aswat Nissa, ATFD, and AFTURD, as a strategic manoeuvre aimed at enhancing Saied's image on the global stage. Aswat Nissa specifically described this move as a form of *'pinkwashing'*, reminiscent of state feminism, arguing that it represented superficial empowerment (Ibid). This is because, under Saied's Decree-Law 117 of 2021, executive authority was effectively concentrated in the hands of the president anyway, rendering the role of the prime minister largely symbolic. This dynamic was also further entrenched in the new constitution, particularly in Article 87, which consolidates presidential power at the expense of the government's authority (Ibid:23).

8.4 The WSECoP Framework's Enduring Relevance

Whilst this thesis does not extend to an analysis of Saied's tenure, justified by the political rupture marked by his unconstitutional power grab in July 2021, it is

important to realise that the WSECoP did not cease its activities. As plainly exclaimed by Ben Jemia, *"civil society is fighting to keep its autonomy and its space"* (Interview, 28 October 2024). As she continued, *"on certain issues, despite the difficulties, we can still have an influence, particularly on the issue of violence and women's economic and social rights"* (Ibid). This is borne out by the activities of the *Dynamique Féministe* ('Feminist Dynamic') (DF) working group, which was founded by ATFD in response to the July 2021 political developments (ANND 2022:3). This coalition – which involved key WSECoP members including AFTURD, Beity, Aswat Nissa, and AFC Le Kef, alongside ATFD – reaffirmed its commitment to advancing women's security, equality, and social justice, thereby serving as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of the WSECoP, particularly in its continued function as a policy advocacy and reform facilitator amidst an increasingly repressive political environment.

A spotlight report on Tunisia prepared by the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND) in May 2022 demonstrated, through its discussion on DF's activities, that DF's formation was not merely a reactive measure, but rather a strategic consolidation of women's organisations determined to maintain a critical presence within Tunisia's evolving socio-political landscape. ANND's analysis revealed that "one of the key challenges facing DF was to gather a critical mass around a common cause and to create a common message that would be encompassing and inclusive of a wide range of concerns and issues. This would in turn allow the feminist movement to begin mobilising with the aim of putting human rights and women's rights at the top of the political agenda" (ANND 2022:5). The coalition's initial efforts culminated in the drafting of a comprehensive Memorandum, presented during a press conference on 30 August 2021, which articulated a unified response to Tunisia's political crisis, outlining key demands concerning political, economic, and social reforms (Ibid:3). In this effort, DF's advocacy extended beyond dialogue to concrete policy recommendations, evidenced by the key calls outlined in its Memorandum. These included demands for the preservation of the civil state, adherence to the rule of law, and protection of human rights as enshrined in the

2014 Constitution (Ibid:5). The coalition also emphasised the necessity of maintaining judicial independence, combating corruption, and ensuring gender parity in government appointments. Crucially, DF advocated for legislative reforms to secure women's access to decision-making positions, reflecting the WSECoP's longstanding commitment to institutionalising gender equality within political structures (Ibid). At the socio-economic level, DF's Memorandum addressed critical issues such as combatting the feminisation of poverty, promoting equal employment opportunities, and revising discriminatory inheritance laws (Ibid:6). This call for the repeal of laws limiting women's access to property and wealth also highlighted the inseparability of women's economic security from broader gender equality struggles, aligning with the WSECoP's holistic approach to women's security and empowerment.

Following the presentation of the Memorandum, ATFD then played a pivotal role in co-organising meetings to capitalise on the momentum generated, fostering a national dialogue that sought to embed feminist perspectives within broader political discourses. In October 2021, DF launched a nationwide media awareness campaign, aiming to educate the public about the risks posed by the erosion of democratic institutions and the specific threats to women's security (Ibid). Bochra Belhaj Hmida, who as introduced in Chapter 6 is a prominent Tunisian lawyer, cofounder of ATFD, and former Member of the ARP, was able to provide further insight into this campaign, which she told me included televised debates, radio discussions, and a social media series where DF activists shared personal narratives and highlighted ongoing challenges under the current regime (Interview, 17 December 2024).

As described by ANND, a landmark event organised by DF was also the "National Dialogue", hosted in November 2021 at the Mechtel Hotel in Tunis (Ibid:3). This "thinking workshop", attended by over 70 participants including representatives from national and international NGOs, academics, media professionals, judges, and independent activists, served as a critical platform for multidisciplinary and intersectional discussions (Ibid). Notably, the event facilitated the exchange of

diverse regional perspectives, reinforcing the national character of the coalition's advocacy. Moreover, approximately 78 percent of attendees were women, underscoring DF's commitment to amplifying female voices in political and civic discourse (Ibid). According to ANND, the discussions centred on the preservation of democratic gains, strategies for legal reform, and methods for safeguarding civil liberties, particularly those affecting women. In December 2021, as reported by the Tunisian news site *Meshkal*, DF then organised a significant women's march in Tunis, highlighting the persistence of GBV in Tunisia and the need for more robust protections. This was reportedly a 'silent' march, with participants carrying placards condemning "the State's guilty silence" and "the patriarchy that keeps women trapped under male dominance" (Meshkal 2021). According to the analysis by Meshkal, this highlighted the commitment of Tunisia's "national feminist dynamic" to persistent advocacy, despite political challenges (Ibid).

DF's activities are discussed here to further cement the epistemic nature of the WSECoP and its enduring relevance. This collective of CSOs also operated as an epistemic CoP, where knowledge production, advocacy, and identity formation intersected. The "National Dialogue" exemplified this, serving as a site for critical reflection and knowledge exchange. This process of shared learning and collaborative advocacy also underscored the WSECoP's epistemic character, distinguishing it from traditional civil society coalitions. Moreover, DF's persistence in advocacy, despite political repression, illustrates the dynamic nature of the WSECoP's practices, as it navigated a volatile political environment marked by restrictions on civil liberties, demonstrating adaptability through strategic alliances and continuous mobilisation. This further enriched its advocacy efforts – with advocacy here being both a practice and a site of knowledge production, reinforcing the existence of a pluralistic and resilient feminist movement in Tunisia, capable of confronting authoritarian resurgence.

8.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, Chapter 8 has illustrated the WSECoP's instrumental role as a policy advocacy facilitator and situated norm entrepreneur in advancing women's economic

security in post-2014 Tunisia. By examining initiatives such as Aswat Nissa's WPA, the AMAL project, and AFTURD's Jendouba Solidarity Centre, the chapter highlighted the WSECoP's multifaceted strategies in addressing gendered economic inequalities through advocacy, capacity-building, and grassroots mobilisation. The chapter also highlighted the WSECoP's role in not only providing immediate economic interventions, but also fostering long-term societal transformation through sustained advocacy, policy influence, and the co-creation of knowledge. At the same time, the chapter acknowledged how its interventions were shaped and constrained by development logics and persistent patriarchal norms. Projects like WPA and AMAL created important spaces of learning, advocacy, and mobilisation – yet in some instances struggled to translate this momentum into systemic change. However, these findings do not diminish the significance of the WSECoP. Rather, they provide a more nuanced account of how an epistemic CoP operates under constraint.

As a case in point, Chapter 8 also underscored the enduring relevance of the WSECoP under the current Kais Saied regime, where democratic rollbacks and political instability have posed significant challenges to feminist advocacy. Despite these challenges, the WSECoP has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, continuing its work through coalitions like DF. This coalition, which brought together key WSECoP actors including ATFD, AFTURD, Aswat Nissa, and Beity, exemplifies the collective strength and strategic innovation of Tunisia's feminist organisations in the face of authoritarian resurgence.

Overall, the chapter's findings thusly illuminate the WSECoP's capacity to navigate complex socio-political terrains, attempt to challenge patriarchal norms, and institutionalise economic policies productive of women's economic security. However, the analysis also revealed the limitations imposed by Tunisia's political volatility, highlighting the precarious nature of feminist gains in transitional societies. Nonetheless, the WSECoP's ability to maintain its advocacy efforts amidst growing political repression speaks to its significance as an epistemic CoP. Future research could extend this analysis by examining the WSECoP's post-2021 activities,

exploring how Tunisian women's organisations have adapted to the constraints of Kais Saied's administration, whilst striving to sustain their advocacy for women's economic rights. Comparative studies in other post-transition societies could also provide valuable insights into the strategies employed by women's organisations to navigate political instability and boost women's security.

Thesis Conclusion

Reaffirming the Argument: Women's Organisations as Epistemic Communities in Tunisia

This thesis set out to investigate how certain women's organisations in Tunisia contributed to the production of women's security across two distinct political periods: the authoritarian regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011), and the decade of democratic transition that followed the 2011 uprising. It advanced a duallayer account of these actors. On one layer, and in line with existing literature, they operated as CSOs – mobilising constituencies and providing services. On a second, interlocking layer, they functioned as *epistemic communities* – framing problems, producing and curating comparative and domestic evidence, drafting legal and policy text, setting standards, and brokering knowledge between grassroots constituencies, state bureaucracies, and international partners. In the post-2011 period, these layered practices cohered into a *Women's Security Epistemic Community of Practice* (WSECoP) that not only advocated for women's security, but actively defined and operationalised it within Tunisia's evolving legal and institutional architecture. This argument was substantiated through a qualitative methodology that privileged indepth, interpretive analysis of organisational practices, discourse, and knowledge production. Primary documents formed the core of the evidence base, including campaign materials, shadow and media reports, and minutes from Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly. These were complemented by 13 semi-structured interviews with Tunisian academics, activists, and members or leaders of ATFD, AFTURD, Aswat Nissa, and UNFT, which provided insider perspectives and filled gaps in the documentary record. Secondary literature on Tunisian politics, women's organisations, and authoritarianism further contextualised the analysis and situated empirical findings within broader scholarly debates.

The thesis defined *women's security* through a human-security lens – freedom from fear, want, and indignity – centred on individuals' lived experiences. It encompassed both protection from direct physical harm and the structural conditions for political, economic, and personal autonomy – i.e., secure access to rights, resources, and

representation. Therefore, it included domains such as GBV, legal discrimination, political marginalisation, economic exclusion, and the denial of bodily autonomy, whilst excluding issues like state military defence, counter-terrorism strategy, or aggregate growth metrics per se. Following Laura Shepherd's (2008) feminist and post-structural insights, I also treated women's security as both discursive and embodied; in this study it functioned as a site of epistemic contestation, continually reshaped by actors who claimed authority to name harms, set standards of redress, and institutionalise protections.

Accordingly, the thesis was guided by four central research questions:

1. How have certain Tunisian women's organisations – as epistemic communities and within epistemic communities of practice – contributed to the production of women's security across both authoritarian and transitional contexts?
2. Why is it more analytically productive to conceptualise certain Tunisian women's organisations, heretofore framed solely as civil society actors, also as epistemic communities?
3. Under what political and organisational conditions did these epistemic communities extend into epistemic CoPs?
4. How have the dynamics of state feminism – under Ben Ali and in its post-2011 legacies – shaped the scope and limits of Tunisian women's organisations' epistemic activities on women's security?

Each of these questions was addressed through my longitudinal, within-case comparative study of Tunisia. By tracing how women's organisations navigated changing political opportunity structures, repressive constraints, and shifting alliances over time, the thesis foregrounded their evolving epistemic strategies. Whilst Chapter 3 examined UNFT's role as a state-aligned epistemic community coproducing regime-friendly security discourses under Ben Ali, Chapters 4 through 8 demonstrated how ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa generated counter-hegemonic

knowledge, built transnational networks, and institutionalised feminist agendas in Tunisia's pre- and post-uprising political settings.

What emerged from this inquiry was a richer understanding of the epistemic dimensions of women's activism in Tunisia, recasting Tunisia's women's organisations as *knowledge-producing actors* engaged in a protracted struggle to redefine the meanings, mechanisms, and metrics of women's security from below.

Summary of Empirical Findings and Contributions

This thesis' empirical chapters offered a longitudinal account of how Tunisian women's organisations contributed to the making of women's security across two distinct political periods. Drawing on extensive primary and secondary material, including interviews with key organisational actors, legal documents, organisational publications, and previous scholarly work, the thesis demonstrated that these women's organisations not only responded to existing frameworks, but actively shaped them – especially through processes of knowledge production, dissemination, and institutional engagement.

First, under Ben Ali, despite authoritarian constraints, women's organisations such as ATFD and AFTURD carved out epistemic space in an otherwise tightly controlled civil sphere. Whilst constrained by surveillance and limited legal latitude, these organisations developed alternative discourses around GBV, equal inheritance, and citizenship that challenged the regime's instrumentalist deployment of women's security. Chapter 4 showed that their influence also extended transnationally, as they contributed to UN reports, collaborated with global feminist organisations, and adapted international legal norms to local struggles. Their activities demonstrated strategic epistemic agency – selectively engaging with state mechanisms whilst developing autonomous spaces of knowledge production. Contrary to narratives that cast Tunisian civil society as hollowed out under Ben Ali, this thesis revealed a more dynamic picture of situated activism and resistance by women's organisations.

Second, with Ben Ali's fall in 2011 and political opening, these independent women's organisations did not merely increase their activism, but sought to transform and redefine the women's security-making terrain itself. ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa played central roles in shaping Tunisia's democratic transition, particularly through their involvement in constitutional debates, civic education campaigns, legal reform, and the development of gender-sensitive security frameworks. Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrated that these actors functioned not only as epistemic communities, but also as an interconnected WSECoP, engaging in shared learning, mutual strategy formation, and coordinated norm entrepreneurship. The introduction of initiatives such as the 'Women's Constitution', the *Hrayer Tounes* coalition, and national workshops on GBV illustrate the emergence of a feminist knowledge ecosystem – both highly networked and deeply embedded within Tunisia's evolving democratic institutions.

Chapters 7 and 8 extended the analysis into women's physical and economic security, showing how the WSECoP produced operational and legislative knowledge in response to shifting state dynamics and increasing authoritarian retrenchment. Law 58 on GBV, for example, was not merely lobbied for – it was researched, drafted, and defended by these organisations, often in the face of institutional resistance. Similarly, grassroots empowerment projects undertaken with international organisations in marginalised regions like Jendouba and El Feija illustrated how knowledge production extended beyond urban policy circles to rural realities. These initiatives positioned women's organisations as translators and mediators, locallygrounding feminist ideals articulated within international arenas.

Together, these empirical findings demonstrate that the women's organisations under study did only *advocate* for women's security – they *produced* it: conceptually, legally, and institutionally. Their strategies evolved across time, but consistently involved the co-constitution of expertise, legitimacy, and political participation. These organisations thus challenged the long-held monopoly of Tunisian state actors in defining women's needs, alongside expanding the epistemic terrain upon which policy debates about women's security were conducted.

This empirical contribution is significant in at least three respects. First, it challenges prevailing narratives of Tunisian civil society as either wholly co-opted under Ben Ali or newly emergent only after the 2011 uprising, instead highlighting the continuity and adaptability of women's organisations across both periods. Second, it enriches our understanding of women's activism in Tunisia by foregrounding its epistemic – not merely advocacy-based – character, and showcases how knowledge production served as both a strategy of resistance and a means of influencing legal, institutional, and normative change. Third, it documents how women's organisations in Tunisia collectively constructed, contested, and institutionalised the meaning and scope of women's security through epistemic strategies – such as legal expertise, civic pedagogy, and policy engagement – revealing it as a politically-situated and historically-evolving domain of struggle in Tunisia.

Theoretical Contributions

Whilst this thesis is primarily empirical in its focus, it nonetheless makes a set of substantive theoretical contributions, particularly to the literatures on epistemic communities and CoPs. These contributions do not emerge from abstract theorising but are grounded in the empirical complexities uncovered through this study on Tunisia, reflecting an orientation towards expanding the analytical range and contextual sensitivity of existing frameworks, rather than supplanting them wholesale.

First, this thesis advances the epistemic communities literature by extending it into a non-Western, transitional context. The existing body of work on epistemic communities, as Chapter 1 outlined, remains predominantly Western-centric, focused on technocratic expert networks in liberal-democratic or international institutional settings. By contrast, this study demonstrates that epistemic communities can also flourish in authoritarian and post-authoritarian regimes, provided they mobilise alternative forms of authority, legitimacy, and relational knowledge. The case of Tunisia shows that such communities may not always be composed of Haas' imagined scientists, but can nonetheless wield epistemic

influence through historical credibility and subject matter expertise, political embeddedness, and sustained norm entrepreneurship. This insight thus invites a revision of how expertise is understood in the epistemic communities literature, in line with Cross' (2013) insight that "there is no reason to assume that actors with non-scientific expert knowledge cannot be just as persuasive, and operate according to the same or similar criteria" (Ibid:155). Rather than tying epistemic authority narrowly to formal academic or scientific credentials – as many positivist formulations of epistemic community theory do – this thesis foregrounds the contextual authority of the women's organisations under study, bringing to the fore their situated expertise rooted in local histories, sustained organisational practices, engagement with legal and policy processes, and long-standing participation in shaping the institutional and discursive landscape through which women's security is produced in Tunisia. Such factors helped Tunisian women's organisations become recognised – domestically and transnationally – as legitimate producers of knowledge in a politically volatile and symbolically charged environment, cast as authoritative not solely due to possessing superior technical knowledge. That said, these organisations, and particularly ATFD and AFTURD as demonstrated throughout this thesis, did at the same time wield substantial technical expertise on women's issues. This expertise was built cumulatively through their over three decades of legal analysis, grassroots consultation, policy engagement, and sustained organisational learning, particularly in domains such as GBV and equal inheritance reform.

Beyond extending epistemic communities' theory into a non-Western context, this thesis also advances the literature in several other significant ways. First, it is amongst the very first studies to apply the epistemic communities framework to women's issues, thereby broadening the empirical terrain of the concept. Through the case of Tunisia, it demonstrates how the knowledge production of certain women's organisations – rooted in legal expertise, civic pedagogy, and grassroots mobilisation – can shape policy and discourse on women's security (Chapters 4–8). This yields new knowledge about how feminist actors also function as authoritative epistemic agents in shaping both national and transnational norms.

Second, it answers a long-standing call by Cross (2013) to apply the framework comparatively, using a longitudinal case study to examine how epistemic communities functioned under authoritarianism (Part A) and in transitional democratic settings (Part B), tracing their evolving influence on legal reform, constitutional debates, and normative contestation pertaining to women's security issues. The thesis thusly provides new insights into how political context conditions the scope and strategies of epistemic communities.

Third, unlike much of the existing literature which treats epistemic communities as homogenous and externally-oriented, this thesis foregrounds their internal dynamics – examining organisational characteristics, alliances, and strategic shifts across UNFT, ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa. These dynamics are explored particularly in Chapters 3, 4, and 8, contributing to a more nuanced, practice-oriented understanding of epistemic agency that moves beyond instrumentalist models of expertise and policy influence.

The thesis also contributes to the theoretical development of CoPs by grounding it in the epistemic and political dynamics of women's organisations in Tunisia. Drawing on Lave and Wenger's original emphasis on situated learning and on more recent practice-oriented revisions by Bicchi, this study demonstrates that CoPs such as the WSECoP in Tunisia do not emerge organically or through institutional fiat, but through the alignment of strategic, embodied practices over time. These practices – analysed in Chapters 4 through 8 – included shadow reporting to UN bodies (Chapter 4), legal drafting and constitutional intervention during Tunisia's democratic transition (Chapters 5 and 6), civic and rights-based pedagogy through grassroots campaigns like *Hrayer Tounes* (Chapter 8), regional coalition-building across CSOs (Chapters 4 and 7), and symbolic acts of protest and commemoration, such as the "Women's Constitution" initiative and public vigils following GBV incidents (Chapters 6 and 7). These were not simply instruments of advocacy, but forms of *doing knowledge* that simultaneously constituted and sustained the epistemic CoP itself.

Further, this thesis adopts and empirically develops the epistemic communities of practice (epistemic CoP) perspective – a hybrid framework that synthesises the epistemic community model's attention to authoritative knowledge, with the CoPs literature's focus on relational learning and situated practice (Adler and Faubert 2022). This is not offered as a universal typology, but rather as a tailored analytical lens developed in response to the specific empirical dynamics observed in the Tunisian case. It enables us to understand how actors such as ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa operated simultaneously as sources of expertise and as reflexive learning communities, adapting to shifting political terrain through practice-based epistemic strategies. For example, Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate how ATFD and AFTURD engaged in sustained legal and policy-oriented knowledge production, such as their pioneering work on GBV and inheritance reform, whilst also forming peer-to-peer relationships through collaborative reporting and regional dialogues. Chapter 6 further shows how these organisations, alongside Aswat Nissa, translated constitutional expertise into civic pedagogy and public mobilisation. Chapter 8 then highlights how their epistemic practices extended into the economic domain, with projects like AMAL and the Women's Political Academy combining research, advocacy, and capacity-building in a manner emblematic of a learning community responsive to grassroots needs. In each case, the epistemic CoP concept allows us to capture how knowledge production and collective meaning-making were inseparably intertwined.

Finally, as a reminder, this thesis did not explicitly engage with feminist IR theory, since this terrain has already been extensively covered in relation to Tunisian women's organisations. Although feminist IR insights were drawn upon for definitional purposes, my central contribution lay in situating these organisations within the epistemic communities and CoPs literatures, foregrounding their knowledge production and epistemic practices.

In sum, the theoretical contributions of this thesis are threefold:

- It revises and expands the epistemic communities framework by delinking it from its traditional technocratic and Western confines. By applying it to the

Tunisian case, the thesis demonstrates its analytical utility in contexts marked by authoritarian constraint and democratic transition. It is also amongst the first to use the framework to analyse women's issues, to empirically examine epistemic communities in the Middle East, and to produce a comparative, intra-case approach that considers the internal dynamics, evolution, and institutional contexts of epistemic communities over time. This yields new knowledge about how epistemic authority can be generated not only in technocratic domains but also in feminist, advocacy-based contexts, and how such authority adapts to survive under authoritarian constraint and expand in transitional settings.

- It deepens the CoPs literature by foregrounding feminist, political, and conflictual dimensions of learning, strategy, and identity formation. Drawing on both Lave and Wenger's original theory of situated learning and Bicchi's practice-oriented reconceptualisation, the thesis shows how the WSECoP in Tunisia emerged not organically or by design, but through the alignment of strategic practices such as legal drafting, shadow reporting, constitutional advocacy, and public pedagogy (Chapters 4–6). This simultaneously contributes new knowledge about how organisations build CoPs under conditions of conflict and contestation.
- It operationalises and empirically tests the concept of epistemic CoPs – a flexible, context-sensitive tool for analysing how knowledge communities emerge, act, and evolve in contested political spaces. This hybrid concept enables us to understand how actors such as ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa simultaneously functioned as sources of expertise and as adaptive learning communities across political periods and women's security-focused issue domains (Chapters 4–8). The new knowledge generated here lies in showing how the epistemic and practical are inseparable: Tunisian women's organisations derived their authority not only from producing expertise, but also from embedding that expertise in everyday practices of advocacy, coalition-building, and public pedagogy.

These theoretical insights, whilst empirically grounded in Tunisia, do hold broader relevance for scholars studying epistemic agency in other non-Western, transitional, or politically constrained settings. They open new pathways for analysing how women's organisations, in regions often marginalised by IR and political science frameworks discussing civil society, produce knowledge and shape security, not from technocratic detachment but from embedded, contested, and historically-situated practice.

Wider Implications

The findings and arguments advanced in this thesis arguably carry broader implications beyond the Tunisian context. They not only offer new conceptual tools for understanding knowledge production in non-Western and transitional settings, but also invite reflection on the limitations and possibilities of existing theoretical frameworks. This section considers two key domains where the implications of the thesis are particularly salient: (1) the study of epistemic communities and CoPs, and (2) the analysis of women's organisations in Tunisia's shifting political terrain.

Implications for Research on Epistemic Communities and CoPs

This thesis makes a case for decentring Western assumptions in the study of epistemic communities and CoPs. As demonstrated in the Tunisian case, authoritative knowledge is not the sole preserve of scientific elites or technocratic experts; it can also be generated through women's activism, transnational solidarity, and grassroots learning. The case of the WSECoP illustrates how 'localised' actors can generate, institutionalise, and contest knowledge across multiple scales, even in the absence of formal power, stable institutional frameworks, or uncontested epistemic legitimacy.

This suggests the need for a broader reconceptualization of epistemic authority. Rather than tethering epistemic communities exclusively to policy outcomes or institutional influence, scholars might instead ask how authority is negotiated, sustained, and contested through practice, especially in volatile or repressive environments. The Tunisian example also urges a shift away from static or idealised

models of community. CoPs are not fixed entities defined by shared interests or harmonious learning; they are often emergent, conflictual, and embedded in wider political struggles. Moreover, the concept of *epistemic CoPs* developed here offers a methodological and analytical bridge between two strands of literature that have typically remained separate. It provides a vocabulary for capturing the epistemic dimension of CoPs and the practical, relational dynamics of epistemic communities – particularly useful for analysing informal, politically engaged, or socially embedded forms of expertise. Future research might explore how this hybrid framework could be applied in other contexts: for instance, to study environmental justice movements in Latin America, LGBTQ+ rights advocacy in Southeast Asia, or transitional justice networks in post-conflict societies.

Finally, this thesis calls attention to the importance of scale. Much of the epistemic communities literature has focused on the international or supranational level, particularly in relation to multilateral institutions. By contrast, this study demonstrates the need to pay closer attention to *subnational*, grassroots epistemic communities – those whose authority is anchored not in international institutions, but in local histories, movements, and social legitimacy. A multi-scalar approach to epistemic agency can illuminate the interplay between domestic political constraints and international normative frameworks, especially in non-Western settings.

Implications for Studying Tunisian Women's Organisations

This thesis also offers a revised understanding of the role and function of women's organisations in Tunisia. Building upon their categorisation as civil society actors, I have also positioned them as epistemic communities which produce and contest authoritative knowledge about what women's security means, how it should be institutionalised, and in whose name it is invoked. This classification has implications for how women's organisations in Tunisia are studied, represented, and theorised. For scholars, it shifts the analytical lens away from a focus on advocacy or donor/state dependence and towards the epistemic practices that underpin women's organisations influence, thereby opening new research agendas on knowledge production in non-Western and transitional contexts. For practitioners, it highlights

that Tunisian women's organisations are authoritative knowledge actors whose expertise can and should inform legal reform, policy design, and governance processes. For the organisations themselves, recognising and naming them as epistemic communities strengthens their legitimacy, visibility, and capacity to shape debates on women's security.

I also complicate the binary framing of "secular feminist" and "Islamist" women's groups in Tunisia and the broader MENA. As argued in the Introduction and throughout Part B of the thesis, these categories are often analytically overdetermined. They fail to capture the fluid, intersecting, and evolving nature of women's activism in Tunisia. Whilst the thesis does not analyse Islamist organisations due to the constraints of its longitudinal design, it also stresses that feminist knowledge production occurs across multiple ideological and epistemic registers. Future research might explore how Islamist women's organisations similarly engage in epistemic practices, and whether they constitute distinct or overlapping epistemic CoPs.

The thesis also invites a reconsideration of how continuity and change are theorised in Tunisian policy landscapes, offering a temporal contribution by tracing the evolution of women's organisations across both authoritarian and transitional political periods. It shows that their influence in post-2011 Tunisia did not emerge in a vacuum but was shaped by years – if not decades – of cumulative knowledge production, institutional learning, and strategic positioning under Ben Ali. By illuminating these continuities as well as the shifts in strategy and opportunity post2011, the thesis demonstrates how past experiences of constraint informed the organisations' post-revolutionary capacity to mobilise, adapt, and institutionalise feminist knowledge in the public and policy spheres. In this context, the idea of the WSECoP as a resilient ecosystem of practices, relationships, and knowledges, may offer a valuable framework for future scholarship. It allows us to see how certain actors operate not only within formal institutions but also through informal networks, shadow advocacy, and memory work. This is particularly relevant and urgent in the context of Kais Saied's Tunisia today, where fledgling democratic gains of the

post2011 period are increasingly under threat. Whilst civil liberties have narrowed, and formal political space has shrunk, as the culmination of Chapter 8 revealed, women's organisations continue to engage in epistemic work – documenting regressions, lobbying international partners, and sustaining inter-organisational knowledge transmission, accordingly remaining crucial custodians of women's security.

Lastly, by foregrounding the epistemic dimensions of women's organisations in Tunisia, this thesis contributes to the growing call – particularly within feminist and postcolonial scholarship – to take seriously the knowledge produced in and through activism. It reminds us that advocacy is not just about demanding rights; it is also about theorising justice, reimagining security, and contesting the boundaries of political legitimacy. In this sense, Tunisian women's organisations are not merely responding to political change; they are actively producing it epistemically, normatively, and institutionally.

Final Reflections and Future Research

This thesis has traced the epistemic journeys of key Tunisian women's organisations across two political eras – authoritarianism under Ben Ali and democratic transition post-2011 – revealing how they have acted as epistemic communities also periodically participating in an epistemic CoP. By engaging in research, legal advocacy, civic education, and norm contestation, these organisations reshaped public understandings of women's security and redefined the terms of women's engagement within Tunisia's shifting political terrain, navigating both the constraints of authoritarianism and the contested opportunities of democratic transition.

Reflecting on this journey, several closing thoughts emerge. Firstly, the thesis affirms the generative potential of epistemic communities theory when retooled for transitional, non-Western contexts. By applying this lens to Tunisian women's organisations, the study not only repositions these actors within the epistemic landscape, but also expands the horizons of the framework itself.

Throughout this thesis, I also built upon the valuable contributions of scholars who have characterised organisations such as UNFT, ATFD, AFTURD, and Aswat Nissa as key Tunisian CSOs (e.g., Charrad & Zarrugh 2014; Hibou 2015). Indeed, they undoubtedly functioned as CSOs as they advocated for rights and engaged the state across shifting political regimes. However, this thesis contends that such a lens, whilst necessary, is incomplete. By also conceptualising these organisations as epistemic communities – and, at times, as co-constitutive members of an epistemic CoP – I have aimed to illuminate their double-layered role as both CSOs and knowledge producers whose authority derived from their sustained practices of research, legal interpretation, norm construction, and discursive contestation. This dual framing matters: it allowed us to better understand how these organisations shaped the making of women's security not just through mobilisation, but through the generation, circulation, and institutionalisation of expert feminist knowledge. It also enabled a richer analysis of how ideas, strategies, and legitimacy were constructed relationally and historically in Tunisia, particularly in a context where civil society was often instrumentalised or constrained by authoritarian power. In short, viewing these actors through the lens of epistemic communities expands our understanding of their significance, capturing the complex ways in which they crafted women's security in Tunisia.

The study also brought into sharper focus the evolving terrain of activism in Tunisia today. With democratic space shrinking under Kais Saied, the endurance of the WSECoP offers a measure of strategic resilience. But it also raises urgent questions: How will these organisations adapt to renewed authoritarian pressures? Will feminist knowledge production be further marginalised, or might it evolve into new, hybrid forms – less visible, perhaps, but no less significant? The answers to these questions are not yet known. But the tools developed in this thesis – conceptual, methodological, and analytical – may offer scholars a starting point for asking them.

Indeed, future research could productively extend this study along several lines. First, comparative research might examine whether similar epistemic CoPs have emerged in other post-authoritarian or hybrid regimes, such as Egypt, Mexico, or

Taiwan. This would help test the portability of the framework and further clarify the conditions under which epistemic CoPs can emerge, evolve, and endure. Second, further work could explore how Tunisia's Islamist women's organisations – largely outside the scope of this thesis – engage in parallel forms of epistemic practice, potentially revealing alternative feminist genealogies and strategies. Third, scholars might investigate how transnational alliances interact with or shape national epistemic CoPs, particularly in contexts where international funding, norms, or partners play a central role.

Finally, this thesis closes with a reflection on the politics of scholarly voice. As a researcher writing from outside Tunisia but in close conversation with its feminist actors, I have been constantly aware of the need to represent these voices faithfully, analytically, and ethically. This required navigating not only cultural differences, but also positionality and responsibility. It is my hope that the thesis does justice to the complexities of Tunisian feminist praxis, and that it contributes, however modestly, to the recognition of these women as not merely subjects of study, but as co-producers of political knowledge. As Bochra Belhaj Hmida – a prominent Tunisian lawyer and ATFD activist – alerted me during our conversation, *"we don't just fight for rights, we also shape how those rights are understood, written, and remembered"* (Interview, 17 December 2024). This insight underscores the epistemic depth of their activism, and the responsibility of researchers to engage with it on equal, respectful terms.

Appendices

Table 1: List of Interviewees

Name	Affiliation/ Role	Organisation	Interview Format and Date

Aida Beji Kallel	Tunisian businesswoman	▪ Executive member of the Tunisian *Chambre Nationale des Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises* (National Chamber of Women Business Leaders)	▪ 04 July 2024 (phone call)
Amel Mahfoudh	Tunisian sociologist, feminist researcher, and academic	▪ Academic at Haute École et école supérieure de travail social, HES-SO Valais-Wallis (Switzerland) ▪ Member of ATFD ▪ Former Member of AFTURD	▪ 07 August 2024 (online video conference) ▪ 18 December 2024 (online video conference)
Dorra Mahfoudh	Tunisian sociologist, feminist researcher, and academic	▪ Founding member of ATFD ▪ Former Sociology professor at University of Tunis (retired)	17 August 2024 (online video conference)
Radhia Jerbi	Tunisian lawyer	President of UNFT since 2013	18 September 2024 (phone call)
Anonymous Former UNFT Member	Tunisian former social worker	▪ Member of UNFT economic committee (1998 – 2000) ▪ Member of UNFT foreign affairs committee (2000 – 2005)	03 October 2024 (phone call)
Najla Mosbahi	Tunisian academic	▪ Fellow at the Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM) ▪ Professor of English at the Tunis Military Academy	17 October 2024 (online video conference)
Halima Jouini	Tunisian feminist activist	▪ Founding member of ATFD	20 October 2024 (online video conference)
Name	**Affiliation/ Role**	**Organisation**	**Interview Format and Date**

		▪ Founding member of Beity	
Monia Ben Jemia	Tunisian feminist activist, law professor, and academic	▪ Former President of ATFD (2016 – 2018) ▪ Professor of law at the University of Carthage ▪ President of EuroMed Rights since 2024	▪ 28 October 2024 (online video conference) ▪ 17 January 2025 (phone call)
Khedija Arfaoui	Tunisian feminist activist and academic	▪ Member of ATFD ▪ Former Member of AFTURD ▪ Co-founder of Beity ▪ Professor at the University of Mandouba	04 November 2024 (online video conference)
Saida Agrebi	Tunisian former politician (active under Ben Ali)	▪ Former member of the Tunisian Mother's Association; Arab Labour Organisation; FEMNET; World Organisation of the Family; and the Organisation of Magreb Mothers (1980s – early 2000s)	03 December 2024 (phone call)
Bochra Belhaj Hmida	Tunisian feminist activist, lawyer, and politician	▪ Former Nidaa Tounes MP and NCA Member ▪ Member of ATFD	17 December 2024 (phone call)
Ikram Ben Said	Tunisian feminist activist	Founder of Aswat Nissa	20 December 2024 (video-enabled phone call)
Anonymous Former AFTURD Member	Tunisian researcher	Former AFTURD member (c.1990 – 2023)	14 January 2025 (email correspondence)

Table 2: Key Feminist Tunisian Women's Organisations

Organisation	Year Established
Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne (UNFT)	1956
The Tunisian General Union of Labor's (UGTT) Women's Commission	1982
The Tunisian League for Human Rights' (LTDH) Women's Commission	1985
Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD)	1989
Centre de Recherches, d'Études, de Documentation et d'Information sur la Femme (CREDIF)	1990
Association Femme et Citoyenneté (AFC)	1992
Collectif 95 Maghreb-Egalité (Tunisian Chapter)	1995
Association Voix de Femmes	1998
Aswat Nissa	2011
Touinissiet	2011
Association Amal pour la Famille et l'Enfant (Amal)	2011
Free Sight Association	2011
Chaml	2011
Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes (LET)	2011
Beity	2012

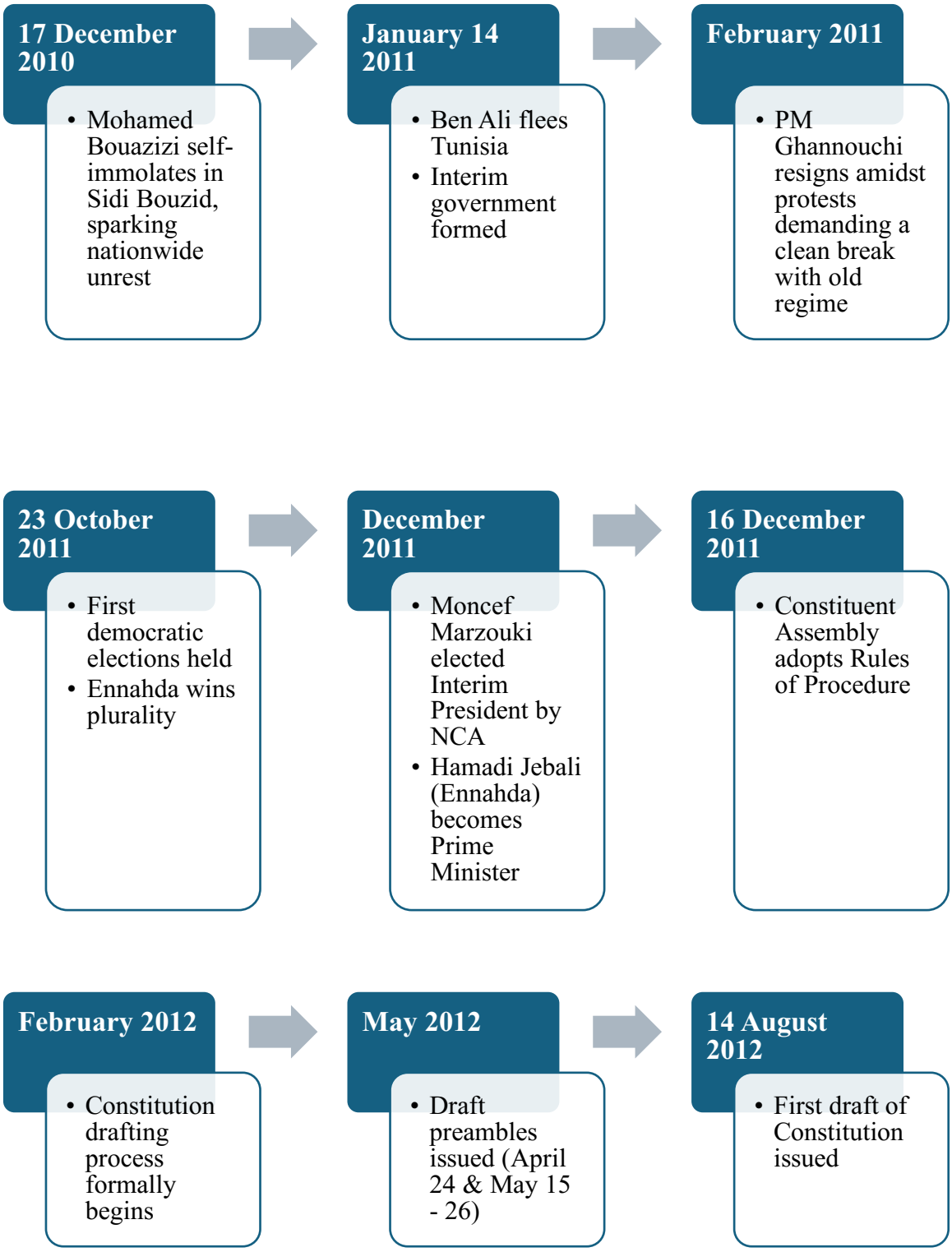
Mobdiun	2013
Mawjoudin	2014

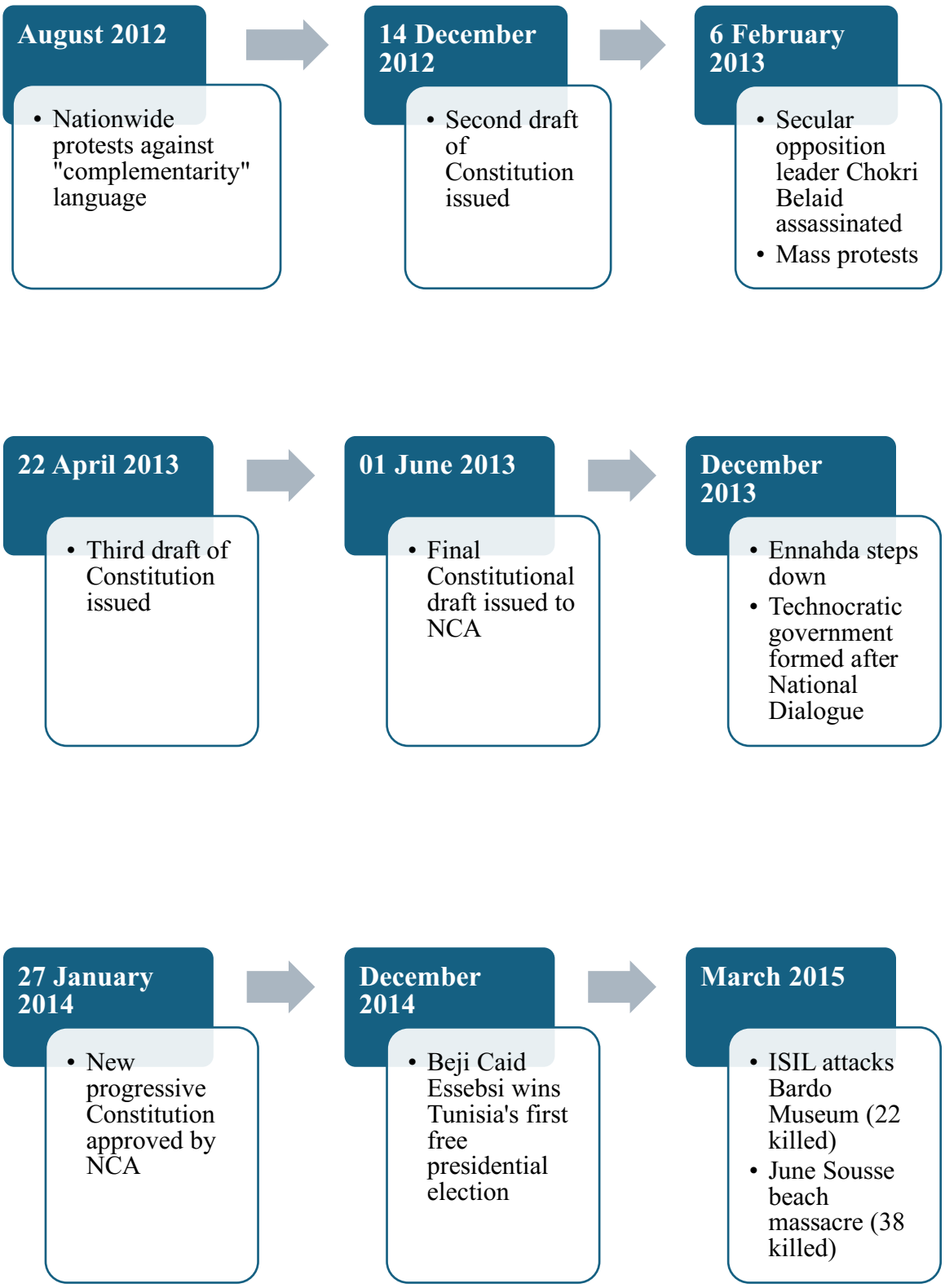
Table 3: Key Political Parties in Tunisia 2011 Onwards

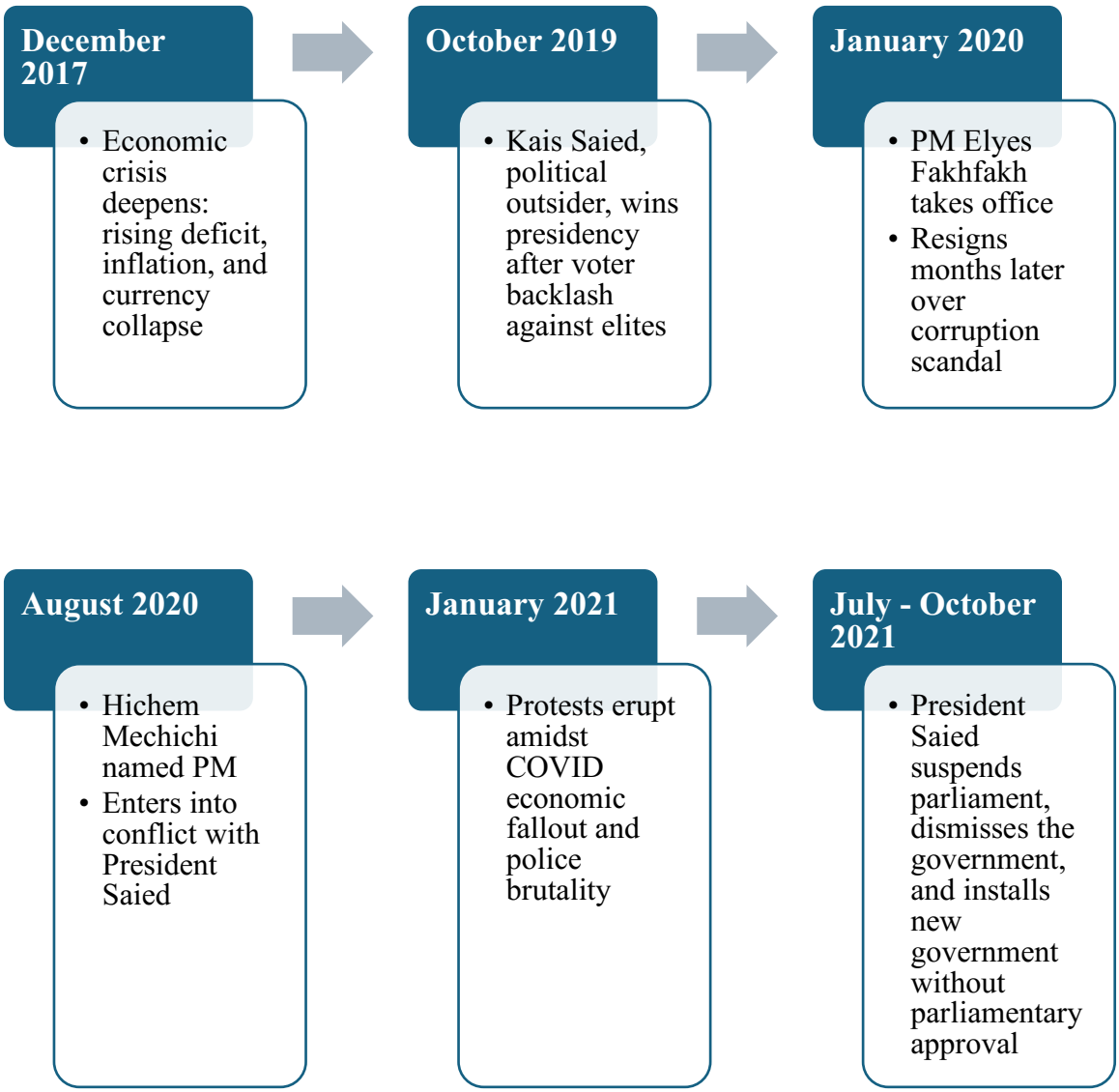
Party	Year Established	Ideological background
The Ennahda Movement (Renaissance Party; Ennahda)	1981 (legalised in 2011)	Islamist, populist, socially conservative
Ettakatol (The Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties; FDTL)	1994 (revived in 2011)	Centre-left, social-democratic, secular
Afek Tounes	2011	Secular, liberal
Congress for the Republic	2011	Secular, social-democratic
***Echaab Movement* (People's Movement)**	2011	Arab nationalist, leftist, pan-Arabist
***Tayyar al-Mahabba* (Current of Love)**	2011	Islamist-leaning, populist, nationalist, socially conservative
Nidaa Tounes	2012	Big tent secularist, liberal, anti-Islamist
***Front Populaire* (Popular Front)**	2012	Leftist, socialist
***Al Joumhouri* (Republican Party)**	2012	Merger of multiple secular, centrist parties
***Errahma* (The Mercy Party)**	2012	Islamist, Salafist, socially conservative
***Courant Démocratique* (Democratic Current)**	2013	Social-democratic

***Parti Destourien Libre* (Free Destourian Party)**	2013	Neo-Destourian, anti-Islamist
***Harak Tounes Allrada* (Movement of Tunisia's Will)**	2015	Founded by Moncef Marzouki; centreleft, secular, pan-Arabist
***Machrouu Tounes* (Tunisia Project)**	2016	Secular, liberal, nationalist
Party	**Year Established**	**Ideological background**
***Tounes Al Awalan* (Tunisia First)**	2017	Secular, centrist, includes former Nidaa members
***Qalb Tounes* (Heart of Tunisia)**	2019	Populist, centrist
***Al Karama Coalition* (Dignity Coalition)**	2019	Islamist, Salafist, populist, socially conservative
***Tahya Tounes* (Long Live Tunisia)**	2019	Secular, centrist, progressive

Figure 1: Timeline of Key Political and Constitutional Events in Tunisia (2011 – 2021)




August 2012
• Nationwide protests against "complementarity" language
14 December 2012
• Second draft of Constitution issued
6 February 2013
• Secular opposition leader Chokri Belaid assassinated
• Mass protests
22 April 2013
• Third draft of Constitution issued
01 June 2013
• Final Constitutional draft issued to NCA
December 2013
• Ennahda steps down
• Technocratic government formed after National Dialogue
27 January 2014
• New progressive Constitution approved by NCA
December 2014
• Beji Caid Essebsi wins Tunisia's first free presidential election
March 2015
• ISIL attacks Bardo Museum (22 killed)
• June Sousse beach massacre (38 killed)

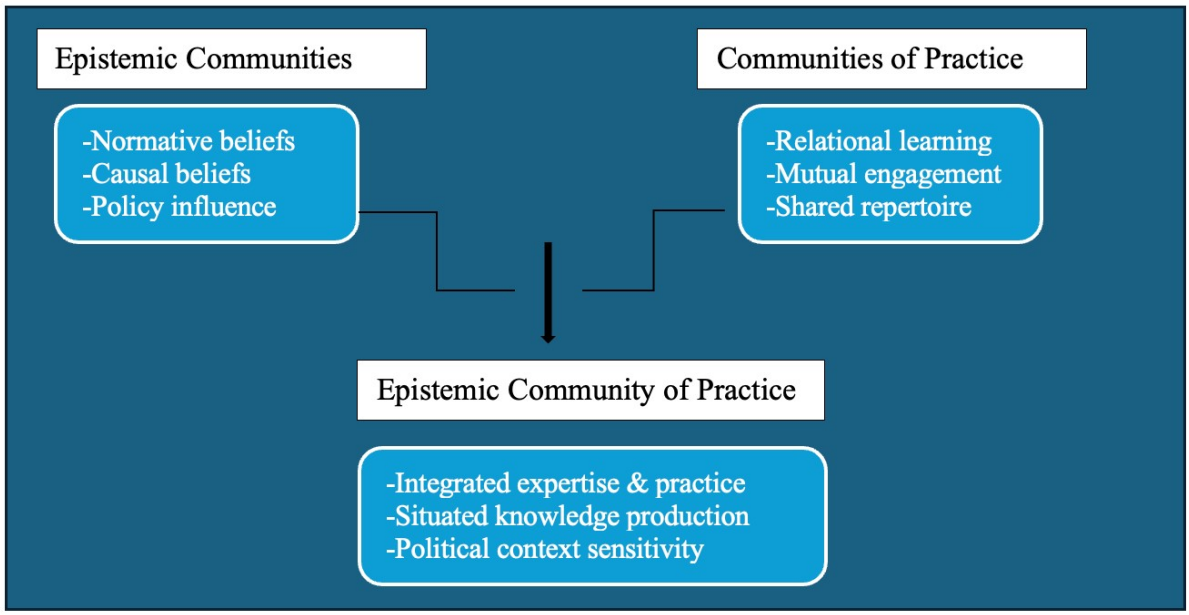


Introduction: Table A1

Key Women's Organisations Under Study (1987 – 2021)				
Organisation Name	**Year Founded**	**Main Activities**	**Epistemic Role**	**Period Under Study**
UNFT	1956	Promoting state feminism, regime legitimation, GBV shelters, women's economic empowerment	State-aligned Epistemic Community (Ben Ali era)	Ben Ali
ATFD	1989	Women's rights advocacy, democracy, secularism, ending physical and economic violence against women	Independent Epistemic Community (Ben Ali & post-2011) Core WSECoP Member (post2011)	Ben Ali & post2011
AFTURD	1989	Research, policy-oriented studies, social development	Independent Epistemic Community (Ben Ali & post-2011) Core WSECoP Member (post2011)	Ben Ali & post2011
Aswat Nissa	2011	Political participation, leadership, civic engagement	Independent Epistemic Community & Core WSECoP Member (post2011)	Ben Ali & post2011

Introduction: Figure A1

Figure A1: Conceptual Framework – Epistemic Communities of Practice



Chapter 1: Table A2

Evolution of Epistemic Communities Theory		
Stage	**Key Thinker(s)**	**Core Concepts**
1. Foundational Theory (1975)	John Ruggie	Introduced *episteme* as socially constructed worldview shaping international institutions. Rooted in social constructivism and influenced by Foucault.
2. Empirical Framework (1992)	Peter M. Haas	Defined epistemic communities as expert networks influencing policy under uncertainty. Introduced 4 key elements: shared beliefs, causal beliefs, validity tests, and common policy enterprise.
3. Early Applications (1992–2010)	Adler & Haas; Antoniades; Dunlop	Applied to environmental policy, arms control, SSR. Noted limitations: elite-centric, Western, scientific bias, little focus on internal dynamics.
4. Critical Revisions (2010s–2020s)	Cross; Faleg; Kourtelis	Extended focus to practice, power, regional and political contexts. Explored epistemic diversity, types of knowledge, and legitimacy struggles.

5. Recent CoPs Scholarship (2022–2023)	Adler & Faubert; Bicchi	Merged epistemic communities with Communities of Practice. Emphasised *practice*, *relational learning*, *institutionalisation*, and *knowledge embedded in context*.
6. My Contribution	This Thesis	Coins **epistemic communities of practice** (epistemic CoPs). Applies to certain Tunisian women's organisations. Reclaims original constructivist roots and centres knowledgemaking as political practice.

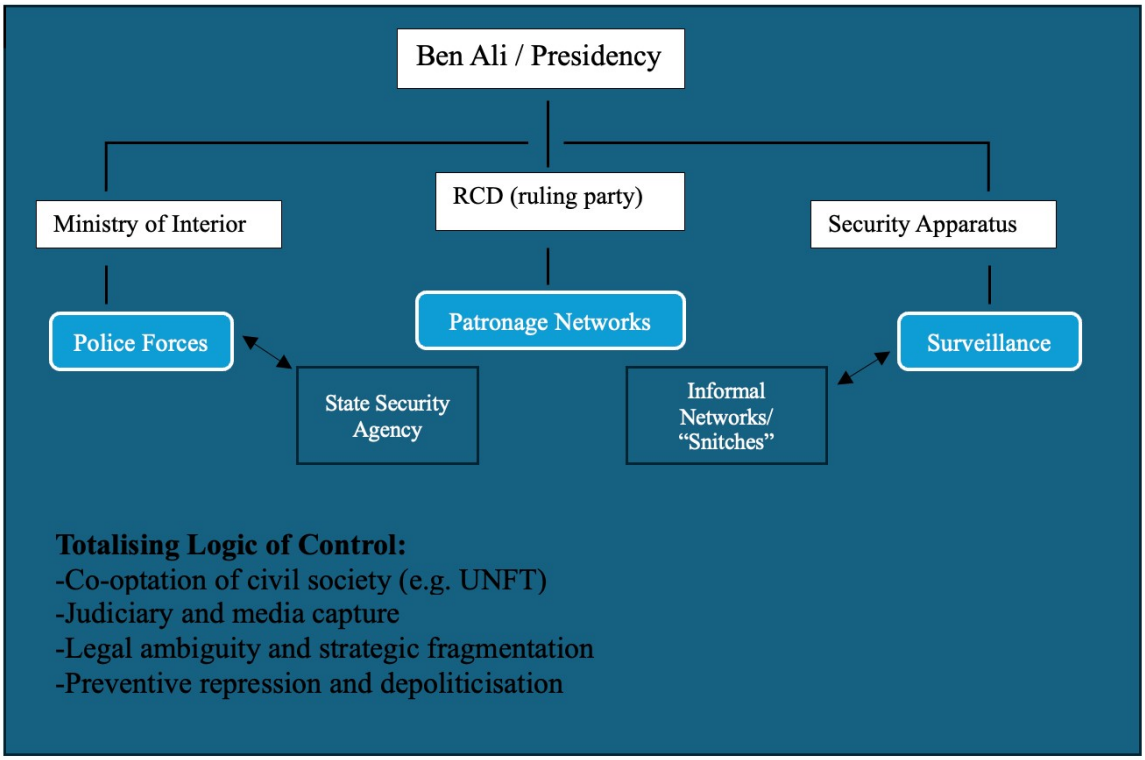
1: Table A3

Key Theorists and Their Contributions to Epistemic Communities and CoPs		
Theorist(s)	**Framework**	**Key Contribution**
John Ruggie (1975)	Epistemic Communities	Introduced the concept within IR, grounded in constructivism and Foucault's *episteme*. Emphasised how knowledge shapes political reality.
Peter M. Haas (1992)	Epistemic Communities	Developed a positivist, empirical framework. Defined epistemic communities via 4 criteria and their role in policymaking under uncertainty.
Adler & Haas (1992)	Epistemic Communities	Demonstrated epistemic influence in environmental and nuclear policy. Pioneered empirical tests of the concept in high-stakes arenas.
Antoniades (2003)	Critical EC Revision	Critiqued the political/epistemic divide. Argued for grassroots and non-scientific expertise to be included in epistemic frameworks.
Cross (2013)	EC + Constructivism	Called for longitudinal, comparative studies. Emphasised uncertainty as constant and communities' internal cohesion and ideational power.
Faleg (2012)	EC in SSR/Europe	Analysed SSR policy integration in EU via epistemic learning. Disaggregated learning into collective, networked, and constrained forms.
Kourtelis (2021)	ECs in ENP	Highlighted types of knowledge use by policymakers: political/symbolic, instrumental, and conceptual. Focused on contingent usage.
Lave & Wenger (1991)	Communities of Practice (CoP)	Introduced CoPs as learning-throughpractice communities. Emphasised situated knowledge, identity, and participation.
Etienne Wenger (1998)	CoP	Expanded on mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and identity formation. Positioned CoPs in organisational learning.

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002)	CoP (Organisational Learning)	Introduced practical guidance for cultivating CoPs in organisational contexts. Popularised CoPs in management and knowledge sharing.
Key Theorists and Their Contributions to Epistemic Communities and CoPs		
Theorist(s)	**Framework**	**Key Contribution**
Gherardi (2009, 2016)	Critical CoP	Feminist and embodied critique. Stressed CoPs as contested, performative, and situated in power relations.
Federica Bicchi (2023)	Critical CoP / IR	Argued CoPs emerge from aligned practices. Critiqued top-down engineering of communities. Reinforced ontological primacy of practice.
This Thesis	Epistemic CoPs	Coins and applies *epistemic communities of practice* to feminist activism in Tunisia. Integrates constructivism, power, and local agency.

2 Figure A2

Figure A2: Authoritarian State Architecture under Ben Ali



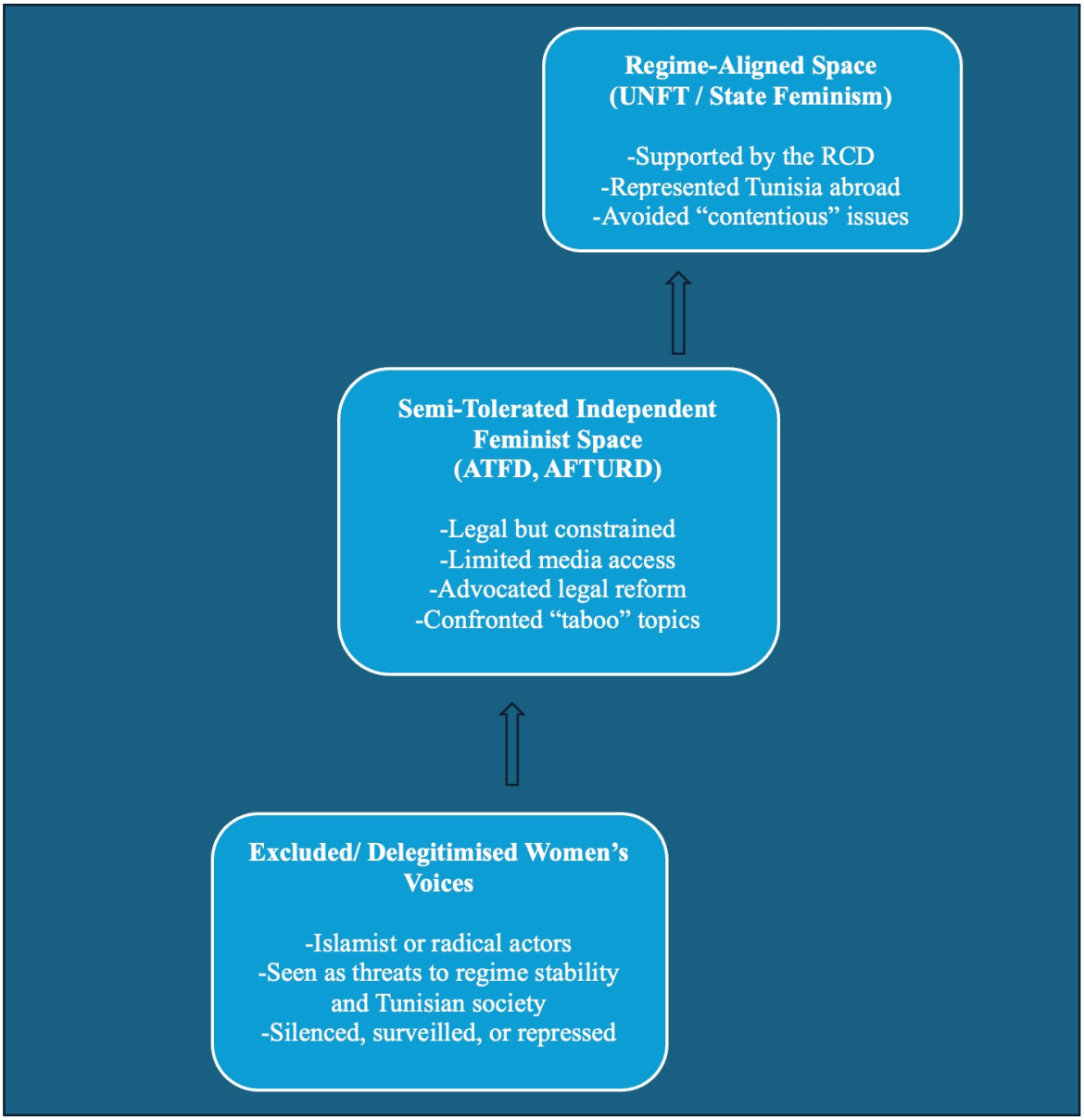
Chapter :

2 Table A4

Discursive Frames Used by the Ben Ali Regime to 'Upgrade' Authoritarianism (1987 – 2011)			
Discursive Frame	**Narrative Purpose**	**Audience Targeted**	**Example / Strategy**
Secular Modernity	Project Tunisia as progressive, stable, and Western-facing	Western donors and domestic elites	Claimed women's rights as evidence of modernity; contrasted Tunisia with Islamist neighbours
Islamist Threat	Justify authoritarian repression as necessary for stability	International partners, general public	Framed opposition (e.g. Ennahda) as a threat to national security
Terrorism and Security	Align with post-9/11 global security priorities	US, EU	Adopted counterterrorism language to attract funding and diplomatic support
Economic Liberalism	Attract international investment; justify repression of labour	IMF, World Bank, EU	Used stability talk to court economic partnerships
Women's Empowerment Showcase	Use UNFT and legal reforms to frame Tunisia as a progressive state	UN, EU, donor agencies	Instrumentalised state feminism whilst silencing independent women's organisations
Democratisation Façade	Signal compliance with liberal reform norms without genuine pluralism	EU, international observers	Allowed "elections" whilst centralising power

3 Figure A3

Figure A3: Women's Organisational Terrain under Authoritarianism (Ben Ali Era)



4 Table A5

Examples of Key Authoritative Knowledge Production Practices by ATFD and AFTURD (1990s – 2010)				
Organisation	Year	Knowledge Product / Action	Thematic Focus	Epistemic Function

Chapter :

ATFD	1991	“Violence is Vengeance and Silence is Harm” campaign	GBV	Agenda-setting; state accountability; public pedagogy; community engagement
AFTURD	1992	*Tunisiennes en devenir* two-volume collective work	GBV	Agenda-setting; state accountability; public pedagogy; community engagement
ATFD	1995	Central role in CME-95’s GBV publication	GBV	Transnational feminist framing; regional knowledge production
ATFD	1995	Central role in the creation of an Arab court for GBV	GBV	Transnational feminist framing; regional knowledge production
ATFD	2000	“The Right to Work Undermined by Sexual Harassment” campaign	GBV	Agenda-setting; state accountability; public pedagogy; community engagement
AFTURD	2001	*Divorce, Violence et Droits des Femmes* report	GBV and family law	Authoritative research on structural legal violence
ATFD & AFTURD	2006	Co-authored *15 plea arguments* for inheritance equality and co-organised a press conference under the same title	Equal inheritance	Feminist legal reasoning; norm entrepreneurship

Examples of Key Authoritative Knowledge Production Practices by ATFD and AFTURD (1990s – 2010)				
Organisation	**Year**	**Knowledge Product / Action**	**Thematic Focus**	**Epistemic Function**
ATFD & AFTURD	2007	"Equality in Inheritance: From Awareness to Legislation" forum	Equal inheritance	Agenda setting; state accountability; public pedagogy; community engagement
ATFD & AFTURD	2009	"Nothing Justifies Discrimination in Inheritance" seminar	Equal inheritance	Transnational feminist framing; regional knowledge production
ATFD	2009	*Un jour un combat* campaign	GBV	Transnational feminist framing; regional knowledge production
ATFD & AFTURD	2010	Joint legal brief on GBV policy recommendations	Legal reform advocacy	Authoritative expertise; policyoriented research

Chapter 5: Table A6

Knowledge Production and Constitutional Advocacy by WSECoP Actors (2011)				
Organisation	**Year**	**Knowledge Product / Action**	**Thematic Focus**	**Epistemic Function**
ATFD & AFTURD	2011	Organising a General Assembly demonstrating solidarity with demonstrators	Political representation; citizenship; democracy	Agenda setting; shaping narratives
ATFD, AFTURD, LTDH, & CME-95	2011	Organised the "March for Citizenship and Equality"	Political representation; citizenship; democracy	Agenda setting; shaping narratives

ATFD & AFTURD	2011	Joint memorandum to NCA demanding gender parity in the electoral law	Political representation	Agenda-setting; feminist legal reasoning
ATFD	2011	"Women's Caravan for Equality and Citizenship" campaign	Political participation; citizenship	Feminist pedagogy; grassroots engagement
Aswat Nissa	2011	Civic education workshops with women across Tunisia	Political participation; citizenship	Feminist pedagogy; grassroots engagement
ATFD	2011	Issued a statement titled "We Revolted Together, Let's Build Together, No Turning Back on Parity"	Political representation; political participation	Agenda-setting; feminist legal reasoning
Various WSECoP Members	2011	Achievement of vertical parity (Decree-Law No.2011-35)	Political representation; political participation	Agenda-setting; feminist legal reasoning
Various WSECoP Members	2011	*Coalition pour les femmes de Tunisie* is formed	Political representation; political participation; citizenship; democracy	Pedagogy; agenda-setting; feminist legal reasoning
LTWV	2011	Launched a training-oftrainers initiative in rural areas	Equal inheritance	Agenda setting; state accountability; community engagement

Chapter 6: Table A7

Civic and Legal Interventions by WSECoP Actors During Constitution-Making (2011 – 2014)				
Organisation	**Year**	**Knowledge Product / Action**	**Thematic Focus**	**Epistemic Function**

ATFD, AFTURD, LTDH, UGTT	2011	"From the Popular Revolution to an Egalitarian Constitution" campaign	Rights-based framing of transition	Civic and feminist pedagogy; grassroots constitutional literacy; public mobilisation
ATFD, AFTURD, LTDH, & CME-95	2011	Authoring the "Manifesto of Women for Equality and Citizenship"	Civic engagement; legal empowerment	Civic and feminist pedagogy; grassroots constitutional literacy; public mobilisation
ATFD	2012	Organised a mock NCA *(La Constituante Fictive)*	Civic engagement; legal empowerment; strategic coalition-building	Agenda-setting; feminist legal reasoning
Various WSECoP Members	2012	Published "The Constitution in Women's Eyes" *(La Constitution aux yeux des femmes)*	Civic engagement; legal empowerment; strategic coalition-building	Agenda-setting; feminist legal reasoning
ATFD	2012	Participated in official NCA hearings on women's rights	Formal advocacy	Authoritative feminist legal expertise; insider influence
ATFD, AFTURD, LTDH	2012	Organised "Critical Readings on the Draft of the Commission for Rights and Freedoms"	Political representation; political participation	Agenda-setting; civic engagement; feminist pedagogy; grassroots engagement

Civic and Legal Interventions by WSECoP Actors During Constitution-Making (2011 – 2014)				
Organisation	**Year**	**Knowledge Product / Action**	**Thematic Focus**	**Epistemic Function**

Aswat Nissa	2012 – 2013	Held civic education sessions and produced simplified constitutional materials	Public understanding of constitutional process	Feminist pedagogy; feminist legal reasoning
ATFD, AFTURD, UNFT, LTDH, UGTT, Ettakatol, Nidaa Tounes	2012	*Hrayer Tounes* coalition is formed	Political representation; political participation; citizenship; democracy	Pedagogy; agenda-setting; feminist legal reasoning; advocacy alliance; constitutional safeguarding
Various WSECoP Actors Led by ATFD	2012	Organising the 13 August 2012 protest against complementarity	Complementarity	Agenda setting; state accountability; public pedagogy; community engagement
Hrayer Tounes	2013	Contributed legal analysis on Article 46 to NCA commissions	Gender parity	Expert framing; legal intervention
Various WSECoP Actors	2014	Legal advocacy for constitutional protection of “acquired rights”	Rights consolidation	Legal authority; constitutional safeguarding

Chapter 7: Table A8

Post-2014 WSECoP Interventions Advancing Women’s Physical Security				
Organisation	**Year**	**Knowledge Product / Action**	**Thematic Focus**	**Epistemic Function**
ATFD & AFTURD	2014 – 2017	Advocacy for drafting and adoption of Law 58 on GBV	Comprehensive GBV legislation	Policy advocacy; feminist legal expertise
AFTURD	2014 – 2015	Initiated a WPS-based mediation project	WPS	Translating global norms; community engagement

ATFD & AFTURD	2016	Submission of legal recommendations to parliament during Law 58 review	Legal accountability; GBV reform	Authoritative expertise; insider influence
ATFD	2017	Public advocacy campaign following adoption of Law 58	Public mobilisation; legal awareness	Civic pedagogy; norm diffusion
AFTURD	2018	Establishment of *TAMKIN* for legal and psychosocial support	GBV service provision	Authoritative expertise; norm diffusion; legal advocacy; feminist praxis; grassroots service delivery
AFTURD & ATFD	2019	Creation of *Tanassof* for support and reintegration of survivors	GBV reintegration services	Authoritative expertise; norm diffusion; legal advocacy; feminist praxis; grassroots service delivery
ATFD & AFTURD	2018 – 2021	Monitoring implementation gaps in Law 58 across regions	Legal enforcement; institutional accountability	Watchdog role; feminist pedagogy
Aswat Nissa	2017 – 2020	Initiated WPS-based mediation projects	WPS	Translating global norms; community engagement

Chapter 8: Table A9

Post-2014 WSECoP Interventions Advancing Women's Economic Security				
Organisation	**Year**	**Knowledge Product / Action**	**Thematic Focus**	**Epistemic Function**

AFTURD	2012	Establishment of Jendouba Solidarity Centre	Economic and psychosocial support	Development advocacy; grassroots capacitybuilding; grassroots service provision
Aswat Nissa	2012 – 2019	Women's Political Academy linking political and economic agency	Leadership; economic security	Feminist pedagogy; empowerment through political training; norm diffusion
AFTURD	2014	Establishment of Rayhana centre	Economic and psychosocial support	Development advocacy; grassroots capacitybuilding; grassroots service provision
AFTURD, CME-95, and UN Women	2014	*Égalité dans l'héritage et autonomie économique des femmes* (Equality in Inheritance and Economic Autonomy for Women) publication	Equal inheritance	Transnational feminist framing; regional knowledge production; authoritative expertise; policy-oriented research
AFTURD	2014 – 2015	AFTURD-COSPE joint "Jendouba Action Research" project	Economic and psychosocial support	Development advocacy; grassroots capacitybuilding; grassroots service

Post-2014 WSECoP Interventions Advancing Women's Economic Security

Organisation	Year	Knowledge Product / Action	Thematic Focus	Epistemic Function
				provision; feminist pedagogy; feminist research and praxis; coalition building
ATFD & AFTURD	2014 – 2017	Implementation of AMAL Project supporting rural women	Economic empowerment; rural equity	Development advocacy; grassroots capacitybuilding; grassroots service provision; norm diffusion
Various WSECoP Members led by ATFD & AFTURD	2018	Coalition of 88 organisations formed to advocate for inheritance equality; co-authored the publication *Twenty Arguments for Inheritance Equality*	Equal inheritance	Transnational feminist framing; regional knowledge production; authoritative expertise; policy-oriented research
AFTURD	2018	Establishment of *TAMKIN* for legal and psychosocial support	GBV service provision	Authoritative expertise; norm diffusion; legal advocacy; feminist praxis; grassroots service delivery
AFTURD & ATFD	2019	Creation of *Tanassof* for support and reintegration of survivors	GBV reintegration services	Authoritative expertise; norm diffusion; legal advocacy; feminist praxis; grassroots service delivery

ATFD & AFTURD	2018 – 2021	Monitoring implementation gaps in Law 58 across regions	Legal enforcement;	Watchdog role; feminist pedagogy
Post-2014 WSECoP Interventions Advancing Women's Economic Security				
Organisation	**Year**	**Knowledge Product / Action**	**Thematic Focus**	**Epistemic Function**
			institutional accountability	
Aswat Nissa	2017 – 2020	Initiated WPS-based mediation projects	WPS	Translating global norms; community engagement

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