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THE ROLE AND LIMITS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENTS IN
SHAPING THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
PROCESSES IN THE MAGHREB FROM INDEPENDENCE UNTIL
PRESENT
A CASE STUDY OF TUNISIA AND MOROCCO

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A case study of Tunisia and Morocco

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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I recommend this work for all those people who would like to get an insight into the political, economic, social and cultural diversities of a region which, confusingly, is often regarded as a monolithic block.

ABSTRACT

How do the main elements and actors shaping women's rights at the macro, mezzo and micro levels relate to each other during different periods of crisis, in different circumstances, and how does the traditional division of gender roles influence decision-makers in approaching the question of gender equality? Would a greater inclusion of women in decision-making reinforce democracy building and overwrite the division of gender roles? To answer the research questions a *qualitative case-study research design* was applied to compare the evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia from independence until the present day with a special focus on the post-Arab Spring period and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Incorporating both inductive and deductive methods and examining the link between a cause or a set of causes and the outcome, *process tracing* was chosen as the qualitative analysis methodology. In addition to the survey and the evaluation of primary and secondary sources, the dissertation collected data from twenty interviews conducted with women's rights activists and representatives of different NGOs from Morocco and Tunisia, while also setting up the researcher's own datasets from the empirical analysis.

The new results of the dissertation can be summarised as follows:

- Building on a novel methodology the dissertation applies a *complex framework* that takes into consideration actors, elements and their interactions at the *macro* (international conventions), *mezzo* (decision-makers, states) and *micro* (non-state actors) levels. The conduct of interviews *enriched the quality* of the research, especially in the context of the pandemic which urged the researcher to apply alternative methods and reach representatives and activists online.

- Based on the analysis of the functioning of the government and the interviews, the dissertation proves that the absence of responsibility from the leadership leads to general disappointment among local people towards decision-makers. This anarchical situation reinforces the recognition of women's rights NGOs that in some regions quasi fill the position of the government.

- The Arab Spring and the pandemic established a quite favourable environment for civil society to play a more active role and exert pressure on decision-

makers. However, the socioeconomic conditions (political turmoil in Tunisia, foreign indebtedness, the increase in the unemployment rate) overwrote initial expectations and did not allow the actors to fully exploit the new opportunities.

- The Arab Spring brought about the re-emergence of Islamists, the consequences of which were most apparent from the point of women's rights in Tunisia where school dropouts significantly increased.

- The interviews proved that the evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia does not exclusively depend on traditions and cultural norms but on the level of education. Statistical indicators also proved this result which explains why Tunisia has always been ahead of Morocco in terms of the development of women's rights.

- Contrary to the general perception, the interviews proved that the solidarity among women's rights NGOs is more apparent in the marginalized regions of Morocco and Tunisia.

INTRODUCTION

The significant role of women in all fields of society in the Maghreb countries[1] has been present since their struggle for independence from the colonial powers, France (and Spain),[2] and during the state-building process of the postcolonial period. However, the events of, and after, the Arab Spring brought the aspect of gender to the forefront of political and social debates which resulted in a more active role of women's rights activists. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has globally amplified and brought to the surface the difficulties of vulnerable groups, including women, especially those engaged in rural activities. Even before the outbreak of the pandemic, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region was strongly affected by a significantly high unemployment rate (42.8%) among young people aged 15 to 24 years (OECD, 2020, p. 5.). With regard to the aforementioned tendencies it is important to underline that while most of the previous studies focus on the Mashreq region not much has been written about recent developments in the Maghreb.

When analysing the question of women's rights in the Maghreb it is important to mention that the evolution of women's rights cannot be separated from the economic, social, cultural, but mainly political and historical characteristics of Morocco and Tunisia. It must be highlighted too, that instead of the analysis of the three countries that make up the French Maghreb, for personal reasons related to the current profession of the researcher, only the Moroccan and Tunisian case studies will be part of the thesis.

There is no doubt the colonial legacy had a great impact on the way historical and socioeconomic processes developed in Morocco and Tunisia. However, due to some limitations to the volume of the dissertation, the pre-independence period will not be part of the current thesis. Such examination would require the elaboration of a new thesis, therefore the dissertation only focuses on the long-term and general

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[1] Irrespective of the various possible interpretation of the Maghreb region, the thesis takes this concept in a narrow sense, the so-called French Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) which consists of countries with mutual colonial heritage, thus the author chose to analyse women's rights movements in two countries of the Maghreb, Morocco, and Tunisia.

[2] The *establishment* (Morocco was an exception where both French and Spanish influence had a significant impact on the country), *nature* and the *duration* of colonial rule (44 years in Morocco, 75 years in Tunisia and 132 years in Algeria) differed in each Maghreb country, therefore it had a significant impact on the future development and identity of the given country (Willis, 2014, p. 19.).

consequences of the French colonial heritage from women's perspective. While the colonial heritage is of crucial importance in these countries, when it comes to legislation, the preservation of national identity was a priority for the French Maghreb region, and thus limited France's manoeuvrability. This was particularly true in the case of Algeria where the 132 years of colonial rule (Willis, 2014, p. 19.) brought about a strong opposition to European values and the reinforcement of religious and traditional practices. In order to avoid social discontent only laws that served economic or political reasons (e.g. contracts or property) were amended and personal law remained intact (Booley, 2019, p. 9.). It is important to note that Tunisian feminism between the colonial period of the 1920's and 1956 (Arfaoui, 2007, pp. 53-54.) demonstrated that a bottom-up approach had already existed parallel with the government's effort to consolidate their power.

Despite the presence of non-state actors[3] before the achievement of independence in Morocco and Tunisia, and their contribution to the nationalist struggle for independence, Tunisia decided to take the path of the so-called *state feminism* in terms of women's rights. Compared to other Muslim countries, the measures of the first president of Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba (1958–1987) (Boulares, 2011, pp. 687, 694.), and his successor, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011) (Boulares, 2011, p. 697.), consolidated a dominant position of women after independence of the North African country was achieved in 1956. In 1958 the Moroccan personal status law[4] (*Moudawana*)[5] required women to obey their husband and women were only allowed to work with the permission of their spouse (Rossiter, 216, p. 7.). The 1956 *Le Code du Statut Personnel,* or *CSP (in English Personal Status Code)*[6] in Tunisia abolished polygamy, provided women the right to divorce and child custody, and set a minimum

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[3] The dissertation would like to underline from the beginning that the concept of non-state actors will be used for sub-state entities (i.e., women's rights NGOs) throughout the whole analysis. This distinction enables the reader to divide the concept of "*sub-state*" and "*non-state*" actors, the latter one of which is used for organizations without government affiliation. According to the definition of Josselin and Wallace (2001) the notion of "*non-state actors*" is quite diverse that includes NGOs, IGOs and subversive groups (e.g., state-sponsored terrorism) whose role depends on the extent of autonomy within the state-centric order (Josselin – Wallace, 2001, p. 2.).

[4] See the Moroccan personal status law, *La Moudawana: Dahirs des 22 novembre et 18 décembre 1957 et des 25 janvier, 20 février et 4 avril 1958*. The *Dahir* is a decree of the Moroccan King.

[5] One "w" was used during the transcription of the Arabic name of the personal status law, Moudawana, during all the text to be consistent with the titles of authors's books and articles. However, it must be emphasized that the spelling used in the dissertation does not reflect the Arabic pronunciation of this word.".

[6] The Personal Status Code of Tunisia will further be referred in the text as CSP after its French acronym. Regarding other abbreviations, the similar principle will be applied.

age for marriage (République Tunisienne, 2012). The latter meant fifteen years in the case of women and eighteen years for men, and under this age a special authorisation of the judge was mandatory, who may decide not to give his consent to the marriage. Despite the adoption of family laws following the independence of Morocco and Tunisia, in family matters, Islamic law remained dominant in these countries, for example, the field of inheritance was also settled by Islamic law (Sfeir, 1957, p. 309.).

In 1957 women were given the right to vote (Jomier, 2011, p. 6.) and in the following year in his educational reforms Bourguiba introduced compulsory education for young women and people living in rural areas (Chabchoub, 2014, p. 12.). The establishment of a strong and dominant position of Tunisian women in society also brought about the creation of civil societies, among which the *L'Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne (National Union of Tunisian Women)* founded in 1956 must be highlighted. With the introduction of family planning in the 1960s and the legalisation of abortion in 1973 (Jomier, 2011, p. 8.), Tunisia anticipated, for example, France, where abortion[7] only became legal in 1975.[8] The measures of President Bourguiba were radical, as they meant a rupture with the traditional religious principles of the country. At the same time, since they aimed to put Tunisia on the path of modernisation, these radical measures were used in a positive context, although no one can neglect the fact that this Western-style modernisation was used as a tool to eliminate the political opposition (Islamists) and show the development of the country to the West (Mail, 2019, pp. 2-9, 11, 13, 17-18.).

Following Morocco's independence in 1956, Moroccan women were in an inferior position due to the presence of traditional social practices. Contrary to Tunisia, the Moroccan political establishment was built on a strong tribal system, which made reforms difficult or even impossible to be carried out. Regarding women's access to schooling in Morocco, education became compulsory only in 1963, five years later than

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[7] See the legalisation of abortion in France under Law No. 75–17 of January 1975 (République Française, Loi n° 75–17 du 17 janvier 1975 relative à l'interruption volontaire de la grossesse).

[8] According to Islam, abortion is only allowed if pregnancy poses a serious threat to the life of the woman and a choice must be made between the life of the mother and her baby. The legalisation of abortion in Tunisia was also exceptional if we compare Tunisia with other Muslim countries in the region. Except for married women who can prove that pregnancy carries a physical threat to their health, in Morocco committing abortion is strictly prohibited by the law and is punished by imprisonment or fines. (El Amraoui – Naami, 2018).

Morocco's strict law has also led to general outcry among women in recent times. Just to highlight that in September 2019, Hajar Raissouni, a Moroccan journalist and her fiancé were sentenced to one year in prison for committing illegal abortion. (Amnesty International, 2019).

in Tunisia (Sadiqi, 2008, pp. 449-450, 462-463.). As a result of the absence of a controlled top-down approach related to the historical and social characteristics of Morocco, the improvement of women's rights in the country has always required a more significant presence and measures from non-governmental organisations, which found themselves in a very favourable environment after the accession of King Mohamed VI to the throne in 1999 (Ennaji, 2021, pp. 165-166.). The empirical part of the research demonstrates that in Morocco the collaboration of different NGOs for women's rights serves a rather economic purpose, which is well demonstrated in the form of traditional cooperatives.

The achievements of Tunisia mentioned above had an impact on the political arena as well and were manifested in the outstanding number of female representatives sitting in the parliament. According to the ranking of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) based on information provided by national parliaments since 1997, a significant increase can be observed regarding the proportion of seats held by women in the Tunisian Parliament. Compared with data from 1997 when women made up only 6.7% of all seats of the Parliament and Tunisia was only the second Arab country in the ranking after the Syrian Arab Republic (9.6%), in 2004 an outstanding growth took place (the proportion of seats held by women increased to 22.8% from the ratio of 11.5% of the previous years). As of the IPU 1 October 2019 ranking, with 78 female representatives of the 217 seats in the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), Tunisia occupied the 31st place worldwide (35.9% representation) and is the first among Arab countries. However, after the presidential elections of October 2019 a regress took place, and according to the latest data of the IPU[9] in 2020 only 54 seats of the 217 were occupied by women, which means a 24.9% presence in decision-making. While the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)[10] determines that 30% of participation is necessary to consider the interests of women, the political representation of Moroccan women only reaches 22.8% in the Lower House and 11.7% in the Upper Chamber (99th place worldwide).[11]

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[9] See the monthly ranking of women in national parliaments via the official website of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021).

[10] CEDAW is the abbreviation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, also known as the international bill of women's rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979. (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2003, pp. 3, 14.).

[11] See the monthly ranking of women in national parliaments via the official website of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2021).

It is indisputable that the Arab Spring brought about an active participation of women's rights activists and organisations, all of which stepped up to push the state to its limits and thus overwrite the traditional feminist discourse of the Maghreb countries present since their independence. Thus, the post-Arab Spring period resulted in the creation of subnational identities in which new topics, such as *violence committed against women* and *identity issues* emerged (Sadiqi, 2008, pp. 48-49). In Morocco, which was less affected by the events of 2011, the implementation of some significant reforms, including lifting some of its reservations (e.g., unequal rights to men and women in marriage and its dissolution) to the CEDAW, was inevitable to preserve social peace. Contrary to Morocco, in Tunisia women's rights activists stepped up to achieve total equality in all fields, including equality in inheritance, eradicating violence committed against women and abrogating the law of 1973 that, according to Islamic principles, banned Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim men (Moghadam, 2018, p. 6.). Furthermore, the outstanding role of Tunisian women in the Arab Spring also launched a widespread debate in the post-Arab Spring period, especially during the drafting of the new constitution of Tunisia between 2011 and January 2014, the first draft of which was intended to introduce the 'complementarity clause' of article 28: '*women are complementary to men*' (Norbakk, 2016, p. 8.). However, due to the mobilisation of women's rights organisations, the controversial article that caused discontent among women and secularist parties was finally removed (Tripp, 2020, pp. 218-220.).

The thesis elaborates a framework that consists of three main levels of analysis: the *international framework for women's rights* (CEDAW, Beijing Platform for Action, the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations), *the level of decision-makers (state)* and the *level of non-state actors*. The latter one analyses the role of NGOs in shaping the question of gender equality. The results of the examination of the relationship between the three levels and the circumstances influencing decision-makers and non-state actors are also summarised in a sketch. Based on the main objectives of the CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action the research centres around the conditions of women in three main areas (*education, participation in the labour force and decision making*). These are the areas where further development is necessary to improve the position of women and these indicators are also important from the point of view of women's role in democracy building and the improving of its quality in the region (Moghadam, 2014, p. 142.).

Taking into account the multidisciplinary approach of international relations, the thesis analyses the question of women's rights from different disciplines. Since feminism is a complex theory that incorporates various flows, in order for the research to remain at the field of international relations, the dissertation incorporates feminist IR theory in its theoretical framework. The research regards the main point of view of feminism, i.e. the absence of women in decision- making and participation in the labour force as a default. It also includes the theory of comparative politics of gender (CPG) elaborated by Waylen to prove that political processes and institutions are clearly gendered and to answer how political change can eliminate gender inequality. Moreover, the theory of CPG also examines whether any improvement in gender equality can bring about significant changes in other fields, too. This is of crucial importance from the point of the analysis between democracy building and a greater inclusion of women in political, economic and social issues. In light of the current international and domestic challenges most of the states face, the dissertation proves that crises (for example, the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the pandemic) can serve as an impetus for women's rights organisations to draw attention on the marginal position of women, although this topic must be approached with caution. In this regard, the feminist identity theory is applied to trace the different stages of the mobilisation of women at the level of non-state actors. Due to the limitation of the theoretical corpus, the thesis will only give a brief introduction of Islam and feminism.

While combining the feminist flow of international relations and the theory of complex interdependence, the latter of which is related to the research on the growing role of women's rights NGOs from the end of the 1970s, the thesis sheds light on some overlaps between feminism and constructivism. In fact, the creation of gender roles is exposed to a continuous process of construction and deconstruction by the given society and/or the current power structure of the country. Referring to Cynthia Enloe's (2000, 2016) and Ann Tickner's (1992) previous findings on the traditional male and female attributions that determine/limit the scope for women to actively participate in decision-making, the researcher examines whether the presence of a patriarchal society can be overwritten by women and whether such changes would bring about more democratic decision-making.

The novelty of the thesis lies in the fact that the research offers a complex framework for the analysis of the question of gender equality, and touches upon the impact of the

pandemic on women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia. The complex approach takes into account the relationship between the international regime of women's rights, the states and non-state actors, and whether gender patterns can be modified and reconstructed as a result of the different interactions of the main actors in international relations. The comprehensive approach also means that historical, political, economic and social characteristics form an integral part of the research. Moreover, the facts are well-founded on empirical evidence (conduct of interviews).

The dissertation is made up of the following chapters. First, following the formulation of the research questions, the main research objectives, and the review of the relevance of the topic the research design provides an overview of the data collection and the methods used in the research. New perspectives and added values will also be discussed in this part of the thesis. The second chapter of the dissertation is a literature review on the main concepts of the topic, such as *state feminism*, *nation-building process* in Morocco and Tunisia or the concept of *rural women*, as well as the global context of gender equality, including the most important indicators of gender equality. The theoretical corpus is explained in Chapter 3. Case studies are part of Chapter 4 with a brief outlook on the background of women's rights movements in Morocco and Tunisia, the main socioeconomic, political and cultural challenges from women's perspective, the pandemic situation, and the countries' approaches to the question of gender equality, including the role women can play in the process of democratisation and the impact democratisation can have on gender equality. Chapter 5 summarises the findings of the empirical research of the Moroccan and Tunisian case studies to test the main theories explained in Chapter 3. The achievements and novelties of the research are summarised in the conclusion, Chapter 6, in a coherent way, explaining all the results of the research.

1. RESEARCH QUESTIONS, RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

1.1. Research Questions

Conforming to the application of qualitative case study as a research design that will be discussed in the following subchapter, as a first step the dissertation formulates the previously mentioned central question to define the focus of the research and to find an answer to its main phenomenon:

1. What kind of elements played an important role in shaping women's rights at the macro (international framework), mezzo (political leadership) and the micro levels (non-state actors) in Morocco and Tunisia, and how do these levels of analysis relate to each other in the analysed countries?

2. How do the dominance of male-dominated norms and the priority given to the public sphere over the private one impact democracy making and the approach of the governments of the analysed countries towards the question of gender equality?

3. How can the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic contribute to the deconstruction and reconstruction of the role of gender at all levels of society and at the level of decision making?

To narrow the subject of the thesis sub questions are also posed which give the research a clear focus and identify those areas the dissertation aims to centre around. Working with open questions will allow the researcher to provide an in-depth analysis of the evolution of women's rights embedded in the complex framework of the relationship between international, national and non-state actors. The sub questions are formulated as follows:

- 1.a. How did/do the international community (including international agreements, women's rights conferences, and UN charters), as well as the regional objectives and efforts of women's rights activists influence the formation of the political leadership attitudes towards the question of gender in Morocco and Tunisia?

- 1.b. What kind of approach (*top-down or bottom-up*) dominated in the countries analysed regarding the question of women's empowerment?

- 2.a. What impact can women have on the process of democratisation; can democratisation bring about a more gender-friendly environment?

- 3.a. Which elements led Tunisia to often be considered one of the most progressive countries of the MENA in terms of women's empowerment?

- 3.b. To what extent do the events of 2011 and the outbreak of the pandemic influence the evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia?

The formulation of the aforementioned research questions and associated sub questions was crucial to elaborate a conceptual foundation for the research based on which the researcher will set up the adequate research design, the applied theory, the methodology, and the type and methods of data collection (Khalid – Hilman – Kumar, 2012, p. 18.). In order to find answers to the main research questions which are about understanding the relationship between the main actors in the shaping of gender roles, and the dependent or independent circumstances influencing this process during the different time framework (post-independence, post-Arab Spring, post-COVID), it is important to explore the main approaches of feminism in international relations. As the research examines the role of non-state actors (micro level) the theory of complex interdependence and social movement theory will also be part of the theoretical corpus in the second chapter of the dissertation.

1.1.1. Introduction of the research topic and its relevance

The research topic is embedded in an *international* and an *internal* framework. The international one includes the legal and political framework of women's rights, which also links the decision makers of all states when it comes to the implementation of certain measures related to women. Regarding the internal framework, the emphasis is placed on the interaction between the state and women's rights NGOs, which all contributed and continue to contribute to shaping the attitudes of the political leadership of the countries analysed towards the gender question.

Although there is a wide range of literature on the topic of women's rights, the analysis of women's role in the process of democracy making in Morocco and Tunisia is considered a field in which further research is necessary. Such thorough research will contribute to a better understanding of the similarities and differences of the policy of

the North African countries on gender. Moreover, with reference to Keohane, the impact of the socially constructed gender role on international and transnational relations was identified as a research gap (Keohane, 1998, pp. 193-194.), where further analysis would be of great importance.

Breaking with previous studies that only focused on revealing the question of gender from a historical or cultural point of view, the research seeks to fill the gap by involving the main objectives, the work of local women's rights NGOs operating in urban and rural areas alike, before and following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The formation of gender patterns is a continuous process, influenced by society and the political leadership, during which existing concepts are deconstructed and rebuilt. Consequently, gender equality can be understood differently in the period of post-independence, that of the post-Arab Spring, and the pandemic. The research topic is still relevant today, as the status and role of women in Tunisia triggered a wide debate on the drafting of the new constitution between 2011 and 2014. The equal inheritance of both men and women and the possibility of Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men, as compared to other Muslim countries, all go beyond the traditional norms deeply rooted in Islam. Furthermore, the challenges that the pandemic brought about also left a significant impact on the conditions of women, the examination of which cannot be neglected.

In addition to the arguments mentioned above, the relevance of the research also lies in the fact that it can have an added value to the given scientific field in Hungary. This is because research on the Maghreb region in general occupies a marginal position in Hungary, while it is the focus of this research.

1.1.2. Project Description/New Perspective

The researcher argues that while differences and similarities can be discovered in all of Morocco and Tunisia, the stance of women occupied an important place in the state-building process of all these states following their independence. To answer the differences in each country, it must be analysed which factors played a key role in motivating the new leadership to choose their path to find an adequate answer to gender inequalities. The research compares those specific economic, social and cultural characteristics of each analysed country that contributed to shaping women's rights

from the independence of Morocco and Tunisia, but the focus is on the post-Arab Spring processes and women's role in democracy building and the means of cooperation in delicate times such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. To better understand differences and similarities between Morocco and Tunisia, a matrix will demonstrate the main findings of the researcher, i.e., the special characteristics of each country.[12] One of the most important accomplishments and strengths of the research is that despite the restrictions of the pandemic and the difficulties to reach women's rights NGOs from various backgrounds, the researcher did conduct interviews with women's rights activists. Interviews are of crucial importance to test the established theoretical framework and the main facts present in the case studies.

1.2. Research Design

In this subchapter the researcher introduces the research design, while the methods (sources and collection of data), the methodology and ethical issues of the thesis are explained in detail in the following subchapters. The research design serves to describe the choice of the particular method of the research (Crotty, 1998, p. 7.) therefore it helps to answer the main research question or questions and explain the relationship between the variables (analysis and interpretation). The dissertation seeks to find the answer to *which political, economic, social, cultural and historical circumstance* led to women's rights organisations playing a more definitive role in Tunisia than in Morocco, *what impact women can have on the process of democratisation* and *whether democratisation can bring about a more gender-friendly environment*. Moreover, the research also targets the question of *whether existing gender patterns shaped by non-state actors and decision makers can be overwritten in the light of crisis times*.

The selection of the convenient philosophical worldview plays a crucial role in explaining the right method of the research; therefore, specifying the philosophical idea is seen as the starting point of the research. Regarding the philosophical stance, the dissertation chose the advocacy and participatory worldview for reasons explained below. The philosophical stance was an answer to the post-positivist approach, which did not take into consideration marginalised groups or questions related to social inequalities. As already explained in the introduction, the question of gender inequality

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[12] The comparative matrix of Tunisia and Morocco on the given aspects will be demonstrated in Chapter 4 during the analysis of the two case studies.

and women's empowerment is strictly connected to the political agenda of decision makers, which constitutes a crucial part of the philosophical approach mentioned above. Therefore, this approach offers an ideal choice for the inquiry. By applying a feminist stance in its theoretical framework, the dissertation starts from the point of view of gender inequalities and the marginalisation of women, and sheds light on the possibility of collaboration between different organisations of women's rights to improve the conditions of women. Due to the feminist perspective of the dissertation, the thesis aligns well with the focus of the philosophical approach. Moreover, according to Creswell, Kemmis, and Wilkinson, advocacy and participatory worldview contribute to the creation of solutions to social problems, and thus it can also offer an agenda for change (Creswell, 2009, pp. 26-27.). Interviews with Moroccan and Tunisian individuals enables participants to actively engage in their investigations and share their opinion on the evolution of women's rights, the impact of the pandemic on the task of their organisations and best practices to address the main challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Based on the type of data applied in the dissertation, the case study method was selected in the research design. This methodology provides the researcher with a deeper and more detailed understanding of those historical, political, economic, social, and cultural processes that all contributed to shaping the general approach of the countries analysed to the question of gender equality. In addition to the arguments mentioned above, the case study enables the researcher to examine the main processes in their context as well as to make interpretations on the collected data. Regarding the procedure of data collection, it must be outlined that for a better understanding of the general situation and main challenges women face in Morocco and Tunisia, the research cannot avoid implicating the necessary quantitative data (e.g. indicators of school enrolment, illiteracy rate, participation in labour force and in decision-making). In terms of the logic used in the thesis, the researcher relies on both deductive and inductive methods. Deduction means that the conclusion is drawn from the theoretical explanation of feminism in international relations and the relationship between the management of the question of gender equality in a country and the status of political and civil rights. On the other hand, the empirical verification, the process of the collected data, and the literature will result in the setup of premises. This means that starting from a very specific case the research arrives at a general conclusion.

1.2.1. The explanation of case selection

The comparative case study allows the researcher to discover similarities and differences in Morocco and Tunisia, all of which share a common focus (colonial background, authoritarian leadership, secular vs. Islamist fault line). The main findings of the comparative case study will make it easier to answer why Tunisia is quoted as the most progressive Arab country in terms of women's rights and whether the adoption of more feminine patterns has an impact on the democratic processes of the countries analysed. The comparative case study also seems to be the right method to explain how the context, national, international, or regional, influenced the feminist discourse in these countries. The reason for choosing Morocco to be compared with Tunisia is explained by the fact that besides belonging to the same geographic region, the differences in the political system, the social structure, the population distribution by ethnicity, the role of religion in the private and public sphere are regarded as a convenient basis for the comparative case study. Further consideration of the researcher was to select a liberal (Tunisia) and a middle ground (Morocco) example to compare.

The historical introduction will make it possible for the researcher to compare the relevant periods to each other and to find out to what extent these factors were able to affect the feminist movements. In addition, it will also explain how the stance of women changed in the context of the interests of the political leadership. Regarding the post-Arab Spring period, the in-depth analysis will also reveal the impact women's rights activists have had on universal values, such as democracy or equal rights. The research will include both a descriptive and analytic approach. The descriptive approach will be applied in the collection of data and in the demonstration of the historical background, but as the descriptive approach is unable to explain the main findings of the research, the inclusion of an analytical approach is of crucial importance to formulate arguments.

1. 3. Methodology

The thesis analyses the position of women from a bottom-up − top-down approach, embedded in international, national, and regional efforts of women's rights activists. As has already been mentioned, the researcher will discover which elements played an important role in the evolution of women's rights on the macro level, which factors contributed to women's empowerment at the mezzo and micro level, and what kind of

interaction can be concluded between these levels. Furthermore, the circumstances that determined the formation of women's rights movements during the different periods in the history of Morocco and Tunisia are also compared with each other. Therefore, a horizontal comparison is applied in terms of the time framework of the analysis. As women's rights activists themselves are seen as drivers of bottom-up initiatives, the conceptualisation of gender on religious-secular and conservative-modernist fault lines is indispensable. In this regard, the literature review in the second chapter will briefly mention the feminist stance in Islam.

Referring to the logic of the research, besides the application of a deductive method, the researcher also aims to *set up a theory* (inductive method) about *how* the different circumstances (attitude of the leadership to the question of gender equality), different actors, the given historical period, but namely crises, can influence the stance of gender equality. To arrive at this point of the research, the topic will be examined from two aspects: the process of constructing gender roles and the impact of non-state actors on the position of decision-makers. Since research questions were also formulated according to the question of '*how*' and '*to what extent*', it is clearly shown that the analysis aims to find an answer to the causes of certain processes rather than invoke numerical data on gender inequalities. In this sense, the research of its nature is qualitative, and process-tracing was selected as a research method. In the following, I will justify my choice by evoking the proposals of Creswell regarding qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2009, pp. 163-164.).

1. The research operates a phenomenon that must be analysed in its nature, in the framework of fieldwork (*Note: unfortunately, owing to the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic fieldwork had to be replaced by other methods of analysis realised in online form*).

2. Regarding data collection, the researcher relies on analysis of the literature and interviews. The results are summarised in a systematic way using diagrams. Besides deductive methods, theory is set up due to empirical testing.

3. As the question of gender roles and the approach of governments and women's rights NGOs are seen as a constant deconstruction and rebuilding process, the research actively contributes to shaping these norms. Therefore, the main

conclusion of the research is the result of a construction based on the bottom-up initiative.

4. In the research a complex analysis method in applied. This approach enables the researcher to examine all the circumstances (political, historical, economic, social, and cultural) together. During the examination, the researcher follows a continuous interpretation and reinterpretation of the collected and analysed information.

The applied qualitative research method, process-tracing enables the researcher to trace the whole process, the evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia. Moreover, as Bennett and Checkel explain, process-tracing incorporates both inductive and deductive methods of analysis (Bennett – Checkel, 2015, pp. 17-18.), therefore it suits the logic of the research. According to Ricks and Liu, this qualitative research method is an ideal tool for testing hypotheses (Ricks – Liu, 2018, p. 842.).

Process-tracing points far beyond the application of statistical data and makes the examination of a possible link between a cause, or a set of causes, and the outcome possible. In this regard, the aim of the research is to find out how causes operate in the reality, as well as to see how these causes contribute to the outcome of certain processes. To clarify the logic of the methodological part of the research, I refer to the posed central and associated research questions that operated with open-ended and qualitative questions, all of which seek to find an answer to a complex phenomenon.

According to Beach and Pedersen, the process is more than a descriptive narrative, it links the cause with the given mechanism, in the shaping of which actors, organisations, or different structures play a significant role (Beach – Pedersen, 2019, pp. 1-5.). The application of case study as research design, summarised in the previous subchapter, will help us understand how the evolution of women's rights developed in causally similar cases, but in different contexts.

Beach and Pedersen distinguished four types of process-tracing: *theory-testing*, *theory-building*, *theoretical-revision,* and *explaining-outcome* process-tracing. On the basis of the introduction and the main aims of the research topic, theory-testing is applied. This will lead to building on the already existing theoretical framework of the constituent parts of the analysis (i.e., the research deals with two different theories: the feminist IR theory and the theory of complex interdependence and social movement theory). This

means that following the elaboration of the theoretical part, the possible correlation between the different mechanisms (historical, political, economic, social, and cultural processes of each country) at the *macro*, *mezzo,* and *micro* levels must be analysed to explore the specific relationship between the different entities.

On the historical level the correlation between the political arrangement of the country is examined, on the political one the approach of the leadership towards the question of gender equality (top-down or bottom-up approach), the democratisation process are explored, while on the social and cultural spheres the mobilisation of women's rights activists and organisations is examined. In light of the different crises (political or health) the possible correlation between the crises serving as a catalyst and the increase of collaboration is touched upon. The empirical testing will help the researcher to find an answer to the aforementioned correlations as well as to make conclusions (deductive method), which can result in the setting up of new theories for the research (inductive method). If correlation cannot be established, the method of theory building will be implemented (Beach – Pedersen, 2019, pp. 6-10.).

To evoke Ricks and Liu, one of the main criticisms of process-tracing is that this kind of qualitative method is inconvenient to explain political phenomena, therefore process-tracing has largely been absent from the analysis of political processes. In this regard, both researchers argue that due to the causal understanding of certain processes and their outcome, process-tracing proves to be the ideal method which results in eliminating certain variables or strengthening the possible correlation between the analysed variables (Ricks – Liu, 2018, p. 846). *In order to better understand the **applied research method and the main steps of the analysis,** the following sketch was elaborated*:
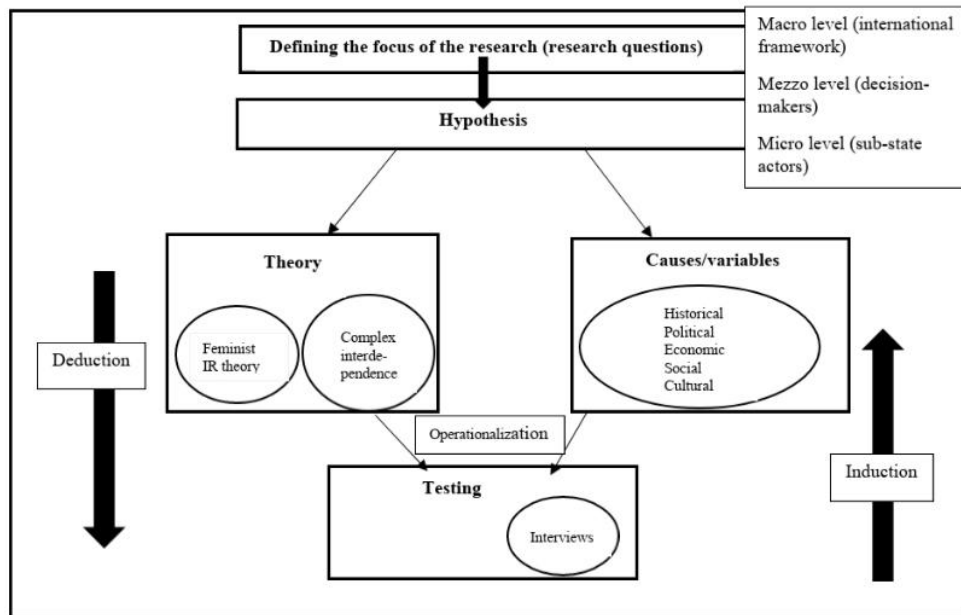
Figure 1. Defining the focus of the research

1.3.1. The Time Frame of the Analysis

In order for the question of gender equality to be better understood, the time framework of the research starts in Tunisia with the political and social rulings of President Bourguiba following the independence of the North African country in 1956. As for Morocco, the same timeline is used with King Mohammed V (Willis, 2014, p. 50.).

In Tunisia, besides referring to the post-independence period, the dissertation also examines the feminist discourse following the Arab Spring. To discover how the feminist discourse changed during different times in history and whether the main goals of feminist organisations were achieved, and whether gender inequalities ameliorated or not, the post-Arab Spring period is compared with the autocratic regimes of the previous presidents. It must also be noted that the events of the Arab Spring also differed from country to country. Compared to Tunisia, Morocco, which was less affected by the violent events of 2011, decided to take the path of reforms (Moghadam, 2014, p. 137.). However, since most of the books and articles used in the research have dealt with the Arab Spring itself and its direct impacts, such as the process of drafting the new constitution of Tunisia, the thesis also focuses on this period as much as possible. It is also essential to emphasise that in Tunisia and the Maghreb region in general the evolution of women's rights cannot be separated from the political and

historical characteristics of the given country (*state feminism or institutionalised feminism*); therefore, gender equality must be understood in this context.

With special regard to the reality and significance of the pandemic on women's rights, the dissertation also analyses the impacts of COVID-19 on women. This examination will enable the researcher to explore a topic with a limited or incomplete literature.

1.3.2. Data collection

Concerning data collection, since the dissertation works with the qualitative method and the aim is to reveal a topic in its depth, qualitative data will be applied in the empirical part of the thesis. Regarding the sources of data, the dissertation uses multiple sources of data (interviews, papers, and other documents), which will enable the researcher to obtain a representative result. Qualitative research techniques contribute to revealing the position of women in great depth from a political, economic, social, and even cultural point of view. The researcher will analyse and set up certain correlation between the theoretical findings or refuse to accept the existence of such relationship. However, as certain phenomena cannot be understood without a numerical relation, statistical data measuring the degree of inequalities will also be implied.

Data processing will be carried out with the method of template analysis. Template analysis is a deductive approach to process primary data (interviews in the case of the research) through coding, which will be realised before conducting the interviews. During the process of coding, the researcher will develop themes that can be collected later in a template and which help answer research questions (Brooks – King, 2014, p. 4.). This systematic method will allow the researcher to focus on the main concepts during the interviews and to compare the interviews and draw conclusions based on the aspects determined previously. Even though semi-structured interviews will be applied, this method of data processing helps the researcher determine in advance on which themes interviews will be built. With regard to the research questions and the objectives of the research, emphasis will be put on the main social, political, or economic obstacles to realising gender equality, the direction of the stance of gender equality, and on regional or transnational cooperation.

Due to restrictions related to the pandemic, it must be mentioned that the initial fieldwork that was planned to be carried out in the autumn of 2020 was replaced by

alternative solutions. In this regard the researcher was required to adapt to the changing conditions and the limited availability of local NGOs. This resulted in the conducting of online interviews. Ten representatives of women's rights NGOs and women's rights activists were questioned in Morocco and another ten in Tunisia, which means that in total twenty interviews were conducted with representatives of nongovernmental organisations or women's rights activists during the period of August 2021 and August 2022. The language of the interviews was French, with the exception of the Moroccan High Atlas Foundations where the three representatives preferred discussions in English.

The hour, or an hour and a half long interviews targeted NGOs and activists from a rather wide range of Tunisian and Moroccan society, including rural as well as urban women with different social, educational and ethnic characteristics of the given country. In Morocco, the researcher had the privilege to question a former delegate-minister for women's conditions, family and children protection, minister-delegate for Moroccans living abroad and ex-ambassador of Morocco to Canada. Other interviewees included the president and founder of the Rabat-based Africa Women's Forum, a Tunisian activist, member of the Women, Peace and Security Committee of the African Union and the presidents of the Moroccan *Association Épanouissement Féminin* and *La Voix de la Femme Amazighe*.[13] Further representatives were consulted from the Kelibian regional office of the *Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne*, founded in 1956,[14] *Association patrimoine pour l'économie solidaire,*[15] *Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes*, *Association Citoyenneté et Libertés*, *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement*, *Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba*[16] and *Association Amel Ghizen* in Tunisia. Concerning interviews in Morocco, the representatives of *High Atlas Foundation,*[17] *Coalition ISRAR*, *Association Ennakhil*[18] and *Without She, I Would Never Be a He* local non-governmental organisations.

Semi-structured interviews are used in qualitative research; they are a combination of unstructured and structured interviews including the advantages of both types. In

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[13] La Voix de la Femme Amazighe [n.d.].
[14] Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne [UNFT, National Union of Tunisian Women] [n.d.].
[15] Association patrimoine pour l'économie solidaire [n.d.].
[16] Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba [n.d.].
[17] High Atlas Foundation [n.d.].
[18] Development Assistance Roadmap Portal in the Middle East [n.d.]: *Association Ennakhil*

addition to a set of the same open-ended questions, the researcher developed unplanned questions depending on the characteristics of each individual. With providing more space to some questions of the interviewer, semi-structured interviews are convenient sources to supplement the primary and secondary literature of the given topic. Moreover, semi-structured interviews provide an objective comparison.

The sampling method is judgmental sampling, which is a non-random sampling based on the researcher's perception of the relative importance of the chosen sample (Westfall, 2009). This means that NGOs were selected purposely based on different criteria (the availability of the organisations, their location, in which the aim was to involve those NGOs, too, who also dealt with rural women). Judgmental sampling proves to be the convenient method to select interviewees as a limited number of people will be questioned. However, the sampling process must be carried out carefully, and contacting the convenient authority or organisation is of crucial importance, since judgmental sampling can carry unreliability and bias due to the lack of randomisation.

When analysing the advantages and disadvantages of the conduction of interviews Creswell underlined that one of the advantages is that this type of data collection offers the possibility to observe phenomena that cannot be experienced directly. Furthermore, the participants in the interviews can provide the researcher with a wide variety of answers, including historical facts. However, bias is considered the biggest disadvantage of interviewing. Moreover, interviews cannot offer the same conditions as they do in the case of observation on the spot (Creswell, 2009, p. 167.).

As mentioned above, some research objectives, such as socioeconomic processes and gender representation, or the ratings of Morocco and Tunisia based on political and civil rights also require the application of quantitative data (statistical data). In this regard, statistical data will be collected from databases of the World Bank, the UN, UNESCO, and the national statistical institutes of the two countries analysed.

1.3.3. Literature

During the collection of literature, the feminist IR theory, the feminist identity theory, as well Islamist feminism, the main concepts are illustrated through the processing of secondary sources (books, essays on the given topic).

The dissertation also applies primary sources (statistical data from official databases, laws, transcripts of interviews, etc.). The objective of the research is to arrive at the concept of feminism in Tunisia and Morocco by elaborating a complex model that takes into account the conditions that constitute the core of feminist movements at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels, and which describe the relationship between these levels in light of the evolution of women's rights. Concerning the language of the main sources of the research, it must be mentioned that in Hungary the topic of the thesis and the Maghreb region in general occupy a marginal position in the research field. A lack of interest in the region is reflected in the absence of relevant Hungarian literature on the given topic. Despite the fact that both countries are French colonies, in most cases sources published in English provide the researcher with a more comprehensive approach than French-language sources.

1.3.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations constitute a key principle in qualitative research that must be taken into account and maintained throughout the analysis process. This includes the identification of the research problem, the research questions, and the collection of data.

According to Locke et al. the gist of ethical considerations is to ensure and safeguard the rights of the participants of the qualitative research. They also evoke the work of Burnot-Trites and Belanger who identified thirteen ethical issues, among which the confidentiality of participants, consent of the interviewees to the interpretation of the data, or the protection of vulnerable subjects should be mentioned (Locke, 2013, pp. 108-109.). In line with the conducting of semi-structured interviews, some ethical questions predicted the data collection (Creswell, 2009, p. 9.).

Based on Creswell's conclusions, the issues that arose included personal disclosure, privacy, the credibility of the report, certain sensitive questions and in some cases cultural barriers, which needed to be addressed before starting data collection. It is essential to note that all interviews were conducted with experts on the topic, including representatives, secretaries general, and presidents of women's rights organisations, many of them with a decade-long experience in the topic. Despite obtaining consent from all individuals for personal data protection, the researcher preferred to keep the anonymity of the interviewees. The sensitivity of some topics was strictly respected in

all cases, as happened with the Moroccan High Atlas Foundation, whose member indicated that the association prefers to eliminate politics from its activity.

1.3.5. Hypotheses/propositions

Following process-tracing, as mentioned before, this method finds an answer to a certain link between the causes (*historical, political, economic, social, and cultural*) and the given processes. Referring to the sketch on the method of the analysis, research questions have already been posed to give a framework for the examination of the topic and to identify the areas of the research. Based on these questions hypotheses are set up as a second step of the analysis. Then, these statements are tested in the theoretical corpus of the dissertation (*theory-testing process-tracing*).

The research attempts to verify the following hypotheses:

- The Maghreb region cannot be regarded as a monolithic block, therefore the evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia requires the adoption of a complex framework which includes variables in the international arena, the level of decision-makers, women's rights activist, NGOs, and individuals. The interactions of different actors resulted in the constant reinterpretation of the feminist discourse in the countries analysed.

- The dominance of men in the political and economic arena resulted in a rather *gendered* society. On one hand, the shaping of the political, economic and social processes by decision-makers and the approach to the question of gender equality had a great impact on the role women can play in democracy building (*gendered patterns* were further reinforced or overwritten). On the other hand, women themselves contributed to the continuous shaping of circumstances present in the field of decision-makers.

- In the context of complex interdependence, the construction of women's rights is a bidirectional process in which both decision makers and non-state actors contribute to the formation of women's rights. This process is further influenced by different crises which can serve to mobilise women's rights activists and NGOs to exercise pressure on the state to improve the conditions of women.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The feminist discourse in Morocco and Tunisia requires the application of a *multidisciplinary approach* that includes the fields of history, political science, sociology, and international law. The dissertation summarises the main aspects that contribute to shaping women's rights at the *macro* (subnational level), *mezzo* (political leadership), and *micro* (NGOs, individuals, and women's rights activists) levels. The overview of the existing literature on the topic and the main concepts will serve as a basis for the theoretical framework and the process of operationalisation in the following chapter.

The applied literature review technique is systematic review that uses a comprehensive pre-planned strategy for analysing and synthesising existing research that relates to the previously formulated research questions and results in drawing main conclusions about the given topic. To facilitate the classification of the sources collected, the literature available of the main concepts are provided. This analysis will reveal and interconnect former theories, findings, and contexts on the subject.

The existing literature on the research topic revealed that the question of gender equality and international objectives to reduce the economic, social, and political gap between men and women are such important fields that they have quite a broad literature. However, it cannot be ignored that most existing sources approach the question of gender from a Western perspective, thus, the cultural, political, and social characteristics of each country are disregarded. Regarding the criticism of the feminist IR theory by evoking the findings of Ann Tickner, Fernández and Valdés emphasise that the feminist approach cannot be applied globally and that the conditions of women must be examined in the context of each individual country, which means that local analysis is a must (Fernández – Valdés, 2016, pp. 56-57.).

Another criticism is that the field of international relations is complex, in which gender also contributes to shaping the behaviour of states, but cannot be regarded as an exclusive factor in influencing the nature of international relations and their impact on states (Fernández – Valdés, 2016, pp. 56-57.). Therefore, the research tries to eliminate this deficiency and demonstrates feminism from a more complex perspective, which

means that besides the IR feminist theory, the special characteristics of Morocco and Tunisia are taken into account.

The growing complexity of women's rights movements in international politics also sheds light on the importance of the concept of regionalism and regional efforts in addressing global issues, such as achieving gender equality. In this regard, the initiative of *Collectif 95-Maghreb Égalité*, the largest network of feminist NGOs, must be highlighted, as the regional cooperation launched several campaigns to shed light on the marginal positions of women in the Maghreb (Moghadam, 2016, p. 2.).

It cannot be ignored that in the Maghreb, the demand of the society, the degree of democratisation, and the economic management of the country by the leadership were strictly interlocked with the question of gender equality. According to Moghadam, the institutional legacy of the past, the role of women's rights organisations before and after the transition, and the political establishment of a country have a crucial impact on the question of women's rights. In this regard, she refers to the main findings of previous studies in the field of women and democracy (e.g., Steven Fish, Eva R. Bellin) and argues that one of the major obstacles in the way of achieving gender equality in the MENA lies in the repressive political culture of these countries (Moghadam, 2014, pp. 139, 141.). The analysis of this topic is quite important from the point of international order as neither Morocco nor Tunisia are considered liberal democracies, they are at the edge of it.

Most studies that have previously dealt with the topic of the women's rights movement in North Africa often neglect the fact that the status and role of women are tightly interlocked with the struggle for power of different individuals and groups after the independence of a given country. The struggle is also understood as a clash between modernists and conservatives, the former considered modernisation a top priority for the nation, as well as between secular and Islamist forces. To address this gap, the thesis also mentions the Islamist discourse of feminism. Moreover, it also relates to the question of gender equality to the aforementioned secular-religious discourse. Therefore, reference will also be made to the Islamic Declaration on Human Rights (Cairo Declaration) and its revised version, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's Declaration on Human Rights.

Arising from the privileged relationship of the European Union (EU) with its partners of the Southern Neighbourhood, it is also important to point out the priorities of the EU and their possible impact on how women's empowerment is viewed in Morocco and Tunisia. The EU's impact on the analysed countries will be discussed in detail in Subchapter 4.4. related to the impact of women in democracy building. On the one hand, regimes of the region aimed at demonstrating to the world that they conform to international regulations and to the promotion of modernisation. On the other hand, traditional social and cultural norms, poor socioeconomic indicators (high illiteracy and unemployment rate), and violence committed against women remain serious challenges to tackle. This is especially true in the case of Tunisia, where *women's empowerment* and *gender equality* appeared to be an efficient tool in the hands of the Bourguiba and Ben Ali governments (*see state feminism below*) to sweep the real socioeconomic and political problems of the country under the carpet. However, the rise of Tunisian feminism between the 1920s and 1956 (Arfaoui, 2007, pp. 53, 54.) in the context of the colonial past of the country demonstrates that a bottom-up approach had already existed in parallel with the government's effort to consolidate its power. It was due to the socioeconomic and political challenges women used to face in Tunisia that this bottom-up approach was born, and, as has been discussed, it was also due to the initiatives of early modernists that the field of private law remained intact even during the colonial period.

The historical retrospective will help the researcher understand how the stance of women evolved during the distinct periods of history and how the various crises (the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the pandemic) placed the feminist discourse at different angles. Furthermore, the vertical (level of the international women's rights regime, decision-makers and non-state actors) and horizontal (timeframe) analysis will allow the researcher to understand the construction of *gender patterns* in these countries and draw consequences on the relationships of conservative and secular norms.

Concerning the international framework of women's rights and their direct impact on decision makers, the research also deals with the field of international law. In this regard, the dissertation includes the main concepts mentioned in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979. The Convention is a milestone in the development of

women's empowerment and is regarded the international bill of rights (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2003).

While, on the one hand, gender operates social movements and the collective actions contribute to the social construction of gender, on the other hand, gender hierarchy is constructed through organisational practices both at the political leadership level and that of the society. Therefore, the formation of feminist social movements demonstrates a bidirectional process which is strictly interlocked with the interests of the political leadership in the international arena as well as in internal affairs.

The literature review demonstrates perspectives at the macro, mezzo, and micro levels. In order to better understand the aforementioned processes on each level of analysis the dissertation also incorporates statistics of the Arab Human Development Report and the EuroMed annual Yearbook when examining women's rights on the macro level as part of the global context of gender equality. The results are summarised in a chart, and the examples of the theories are presented in the following:

Analysed level	Theory	Literature
International (macro)	Theory will not be applied on this level	CEDAW and its Optional Protocol 2003; Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995
Decision makers, states (mezzo)	Feminist IR theory	Tickner 1992; Scott 1986; Enloe 1993, 2000, 2016
	Gender order theory	Connell 2005
Non-state actors (micro)	Complex interdependence	Nye and Keohane 1971
	Social movement theory	Oberschall 1997
	Feminist identity theory	Downing and Roush 1985

Table 1: The Levels of Analysis, the Corresponding Theories, and the Literature

Since the dissertation deals with the deconstruction and reconstruction of gender patterns on the level of decision makers and that of non-state actors, the macro level of analysis serves only as an international framework that contributes to shaping the attitude of states towards the question of gender equality. Therefore, no theory is applied at this level of research. Instead, the main concepts (*e.g.*, *discrimination and exclusion based on gender, social and economic marginalisation, rural women*) of the thesis are derived from the international conventions. The dissertation uses the absence of women in decision-making as a starting point and states that *gendered* international relations are well reflected in the approach of governments to the position of women. It must be emphasised that Cinthya Enloe's concept of gender and militarisation, masculinity of war, women and peacekeeping and masculinisation of the security sphere (Enloe, 1993.) will not be part of the dissertation. Instead, the thesis focuses on the domestic processes of Morocco and Tunisia and the relationship between actors at the mezzo and micro levels whose attitudes are shaped by general norms derived from international conventions and protocols. As has already been mentioned in the *research design and methodology,* only the possible correlation between the implementation of democratic values and the role of Moroccan and Tunisian women in democratisation are mentioned.

2. 1. The global context of gender equality: a terminological introduction

While claims for global gender goals appeared from the 1970s and 1980s, the involvement of international organisations and states in targeting women's rights began in the 1990s. However, the real breakthrough was achieved in the 2000s following the publication of the UN Millennium Development Goals, which, among other objectives, considered equality in education a priority (Fennell – Arnot, 2008, p. 2.).

Here, the literature review already introduces the most significant points of the theoretical corpus. The starting point of the thesis is the absence of women from the political (public) sphere, a demand feminists continuously push for. This absence is the result of being regarded incompetent to fulfil this task due to the existing stereotypes which led to a rigid division between the private and public spheres of life, thus to the *masculinisation of public institutions* (Waylen, 2007, pp. 3-4.).

In order for the aforementioned stereotypes to be dissolved it is important to reformulate the socially constructed gender roles. *Women's rights activists* and *grass roots organisations* can play a key role in these efforts. Moreover, *domestic and regional organisations* can also exert a significant influence on public opinion as well as on decision-making processes. According to Joseph Nye and Robert O. Keohane in certain cases non-governmental actors have a greater impact on international processes than states themselves and contrary to interstate activities transnational interactions involve sub state actors as well (Nye–Keohane, 1971, pp. 331–332.).

Distinguishing between *women* and *gender* is also of crucial importance when defining the term of *feminism* and *feminist activism*. Whereas early activism rather served an economic purpose and was entitled *Women in Development*, research in the 1980s promoted the use of *gender* instead of women to describe the role women play in society (Fennell – Arnot, 2008, pp. 4, 6.). This socially constructed term (*Gender and Development*) also fits the current research that regards the evolution of women's rights a socially constructed process influenced by historical, economic, political, religious, ideological and cultural circumstances. It is in this context that each country has different interpretations regarding gender and gender relations. A bright example to this is the *nation-state building* (also called *state feminism*) process, a path chosen by leaders of the analysed countries following their independence. From the point of the current analysis, the question is to what extent global context can influence decision-makers to adopt a more gender-friendly approach, and whether a greater role of women in decision-making can result in a significant and qualitative change in terms of the political management of the given country.

However, it must also not be neglected that while gender equality is a universal claim, its Western interpretation reflects the impact of colonial legacy and the spread of Western values, modernisation and liberal democracy. As Fennell and Arnot stated, ensuring gender equality is more difficult in poorer countries where NGOs and grass root activists aim at promoting equal rights for women, with little success (Fennell – Arnot, 2008, p. 3).

Since the global context of gender equality is a widespread topic interpreted from the viewpoint of different scientific disciplines the dissertation took the most important

terms of the international conventions as a reference to explain the global context of feminism.

Regarding the terminology of gender equality, the glossary of terms and concepts elaborated by the United Nations must be underlined since it summarises key terms like *discrimination (gender discrimination), empowerment, gender equality, gender gap, gender norms, gender roles or structural barriers/causes and structural discrimination*.[19]

Gender equality, which also figures among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations adopted in 2015, evokes that priorities and needs of men and women should equally be taken into consideration. This would then bring about economic, social, cultural and political development. However, it must be emphasised that achieving equality does not mean changes in gender roles as it is proposed by advocates of feminist IR theory.

In fact, the realisation of equality between men and women helps to reduce the *gender gap*, the disproportionate difference between the two sexes that hinders any kind of development. Therefore, gender equality is a socially constructed concept that must be redefined according to the different circumstances and time periods of the given country.

Gender norms are strictly interwoven with the aforementioned approach of gender as being a socially constructed term. So is the case for *gender roles* that are specific female and masculine attributions determined by a particular culture to describe the traditional responsibilities of men and women. The traditional division between female and masculine roles is also indispensable to understand, and it serves a basis for what Tickner called a 'gendered' society. As it will be explained in the theoretical corpus, gender relations are in fact power relations that derive from the traditional division of roles between the sexes (*private* versus *public* sphere) which further strengthen women's inferior status in the political arena. Contrary to the private versus public dichotomy, Waylen argued that the boundaries between the two spheres have not been fixed, and women have not remained entirely outside the public sphere. Moreover, she underlined the importance of bringing some private topics like violence to the public sphere in order to provide greater political rights for women (Waylen, 2007, pp. 4-5.).

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[19] See Glossary of Terms and Concepts. UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia November 2017 [n.d.].

Based on the previous findings, as the glossary explains, *structural barriers/causes* and *structural discrimination* will continue maintaining the unequal position between men and women and no changes can take place as long as institutions and decision-makers produce and reproduce gender norms and stereotypes. Waylen underlined that in order to understand how politics and decision-making work we must start off with the fact that states and political parties are clearly gendered which means that the decision-making process reflects a hierarchical order with relatively more men sitting at the top than women. According to Waylen this unequal distribution of power results in neglecting the diverse interests of women as well as decreasing their chances in achieving a higher percentage of representation in political institutions. At the same time, Waylen refers to the literature of gender and politics that focuses on different methods regarding the increase of the percentage of women in decision-making. A central point of such efforts is the introduction of quotas as an important accomplishment following the Beijing Women's Conference Platform for Action (Waylen, 2007, pp. 9-10.). The question of women's participation in political life and the outcome of their inclusion in politics will be an important aspect of the dissertation that will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.5.

The term *empowerment* is the adequate concept to describe the role that NGOs can play in shaping the question of women's rights on the individual (micro) level via different awareness-raising campaigns as recently happened due to a significant increase in gender-based violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. Raising awareness contributes to boosting personal, political, social and economic strength, thus enables women to control their lives. This aspect can also be linked to the feminist identity theory of Downing and Roush that regards motivation to trigger changes a basis to achieving equal rights between men and women.

The following subchapter dedicated to the examination of women's rights on the macro (international) level sets up the terminological part of the dissertation, thus establishes the global framework of gender equality in which the Moroccan and Tunisian cases studies must be understood. However, as has been mentioned, the researcher must consider the country specific characteristics when analysing the question of gender equality. Some key terms, e.g. *discrimination* or gender mainstreaming are also explained by statistical indicators from Morocco and Tunisia.

2.2. Analysis at the macro level: main concepts to approach the question of gender equality

The analysis of the impact at the macro level (international framework) on the behaviour of states towards the question of gender equality leads the researcher to elaborate the following concise definitions that must be addressed to understand the gender question in the Maghreb countries. Most definitions are explained in the framework of the CEDAW, which is considered the international bill of women's rights, its recommendations were carried out during subsequent follow-up conferences, from which the Beijing conference in 1995 stands out (adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action).[20] These concepts are of crucial importance from the point of the process of operationalisation that will be carried out when analysing the possible correlation between the theories and the causes/variables (*see process-tracing*).

The adoption of the CEDAW in 1979 also brought a new era for the countries of the Maghreb region. Both countries had to decide how to reconcile the internationally determined parameters of women's rights with their cultural and religious characteristics. Since international parameters also contributed to the deconstruction and reconstruction of the status and role of women, the actions and interactions of different actors and their impact on non-state actors must be taken into account. It is also crucial to examine whether the adoption of internationally determined parameters were a trump card for leaders to demonstrate modernity and development to the international community, or in reality they contributed to the evolution of women's rights. This aspect also forms part of the empirical part of the research, where the evaluation of the relationship between the international community and states by women's rights NGOs will reveal this question.

Regarding the importance of CEDAW in the evolution of women's rights, Abbott stated that the convention not only visualises political, social, and economic equality for women, but it also focuses on achieving the same initiatives in education and cultural practices. Therefore, the convention offers a comprehensive solution for the elimination of gender inequalities. Regarding the MENA region, Abbott saw social institutions as the biggest obstacles in the way of achieving equality in these countries. This is manifested in the reservations of certain states to CEDAW.

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[20] See United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women [n.d.b].

The institutional limits of gender equality were also reinforced by Moghadam, who stated that the institutional legacy of the past, the role of women's rights organisations before and after the transition, and the political establishment of a country have a crucial impact on the question of women's rights. In this regard, she refers to the main findings of previous studies in the field of women and democracy (e.g. Steven Fish, Eva R. Bellin) and argues that one of the main obstacles in achieving gender equality in the MENA lies in the repressive political culture of these countries (Moghadam, 2014, pp. 139, 141.). Related to gender inequalities, Abbott highlighted that the highest gender gap is found in the MENA and emphasised that analysis of both social, economic and political circumstances is a must in understanding the root causes of the gender gap (Abbott, 2017, pp. 8, 10.).

2.2.1. Institutionalisation of the question of gender equality

The end of the 1970s clearly demonstrated that global challenges could not be treated anymore in the conventional framework of nation states. Thus, new political actors appeared to be interested in solving boundary-crossing problems. As mentioned above, the adoption of the CEDAW laid the foundations of the international framework for women's rights. Among the subsequent follow-up conferences, the Beijing conference in 1995 brought about the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action (Abbott, 2017, pp. 8, 10.). According to the Beijing Platform, every government is responsible for ensuring appropriate working conditions for women and putting an end to discrimination. In addition to elaborating the notion of *gender mainstreaming* as a main strategy for governments to achieve equality between women and men, twelve areas were identified where greater efforts must be made to eliminate inequalities. These include the following: women and poverty, education and training for women, women and health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision making, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, human rights of women, women and the media, women and the environment and the girl child.

In 1997, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) also reinforced the strategy of *gender mainstreaming* as previously decided in the Beijing Platform for Action and highlighted the fact that *gender mainstreaming* should include

all levels and areas, i.e., political, economic, and social spheres (United Nations, 2002, pp. 5, 13.). From the point of view of the case study of Morocco and Tunisia, it is to underline that the Beijing Platform for Action identified the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as the region most affected by inequalities in terms of participation in the labour force (56%). Unfortunately, it was only in 2012 that some improvement was identified, as a result of which this ratio decreased to 53%.[21]

2.2.2. Discrimination and exclusion based on gender

Article 1 of the CEDAW gives a clear definition to discrimination: it states that discrimination is ...*"any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field*."[22] The preamble of the Convention sees discrimination as an obstacle to full participation of women in all fields of society, as well as to the prosperity and development of a country. Therefore, CEDAW provides a brief outlook on all the necessary measures (ensuring equal political participation, educational reforms, etc.) about which governments should take action to provide gender equality.[23]

Tunisia has been the voice for gender equality since the coming to power of Bourguiba in 1957 and the introduction of the aforementioned *Code du Statut Personnel* in 1956 during the premiership of Bourguiba (1955–57) (Pace, 2000). On the one hand, the political representation of women and their presence across the academic fields, civil service, trade unions, etc. make Tunisia stand out from Morocco, where some significant reforms[24] were also achieved at the beginning of the new millennium, but

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[21] United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women [2015].
[22] Quoted from the official website of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women [n.d.a].
[23] *Ibid.*
[24] In Morocco these achievements included changes to the electoral code in 2002 which reserved 30 parliamentary seats for women, the replacement of the personal status law of 1958 (*moudawana*) with a more egalitarian set of laws and norms in 2004 and the introduction of the concept of sexual harassment in the workplace in the new labour law of 2004. The new family code is considered an outstanding achievement in terms of women's rights as the code placed the family under joint responsibility, made the practice of polygamy strictly controlled, improved the rights of inheritance for women and allowed the possibility of the custody of children for women. However, despite these improvements, cultural norms

these results remained far beyond those of Tunisia. On the other hand, current statistical data prove the opposite of the outstanding Tunisian example. In Tunisia, the overall unemployment rate of women is double that of men (22.7%), and in rural areas it is 40%, or even 70% of women with a college degree who are unemployed. According to the statistical data of the latest EuroMed annual Yearbook of 2021 gender inequalities in the labour market are even more worrisome in Tunisia with only 24.9% participation of women. (In Morocco 21.6% of women participate in the labour market with a 22.3% youth unemployment rate) in a country where unemployment touches 35.8% of the young generation.[25] Furthermore, women in Tunisia generally earn two-thirds of the salary ofa man (ElHajjaji, 2018).

Concerning the comparison of statistical data of the two countries analysed, it must be laid down from the beginning that the researcher faced difficulties during the search for up-to-date reliable data. The major indicators necessary for the analysis of the socioeconomic conditions such as unemployment or literacy rate are mostly based on national (e.g., HCP, INS) and international (e.g., UNESCO, UNDP, and IPU) estimations. The indicator of the GII[26] is crucially important in relation to discrimination and exclusion based on gender. The GII clearly demonstrated that in Morocco women's participation in the labour force and decision making are key areas where further improvements had been urgently needed even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding the share of women in the labour force, official statistical data from the High Commission of Planning (Haut Commissariat au Plan) is only available from 1999 with a significant increase in the female unemployment rate from 2017 (8.8%) that reached 14.7% in 2020.[27]

According to the GII, in 2019 female participation in the labour force was 21.5% compared to 70.1% in the case of men. In Tunisia the greatest gap was identified in the field of participation in the labour market where women aged 15 and over made up only 23.8% of the labour market, contrary to 69.4% for men. According to the Tunisian

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and high illiteracy rates remain the biggest obstacles in front of the accomplishment of gender equality (Moghadam, 2016 and EuroMed Rights, 2012).

[25] See the IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2021 [n.d.], p. 160, 168.

[26] Elaborated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index (GII) was created to measure inequalities on three main dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and labour market with different indicators in each dimension. United Nations Development Programme [n.d.]

[27] See the official website of the Haut-Comissariat au Plan [n.d.] [HCP, High Commission of Planning, Morocco].

Institute of Statistics[28], in 2014 only 20% of women living in rural areas had a decent job and in some regions the unemployment rate surpassed 40%. In the most marginalised regions, 61% of women worked in the most vulnerable agricultural sector, among whom only 12% had access to medical and social services (République Tunisienne, Ministère de la Femme, de la Fertilité et de l'Enfance, 2017). This percentage clearly shows that the low participation of women in the labour force and the conditions of rural women were worrying even before the outbreak of the pandemic and were further exacerbated by the growing political and social tensions starting from 2019.

Regarding women's access to schooling, it should be mentioned that contrary to Tunisia, education became compulsory in Morocco only in 1963, five years later than in Tunisia. When it comes to illiteracy, unfortunately the indicators are far from promising, as Morocco has the highest illiteracy rate in the Maghreb (Sadiqi, 2008, p.-462.) that affects women living in rural areas (60%). Although the net primary enrolment rate in Morocco demonstrated a significant 63% increase from 1990 to 2002/2003 (57% vs. 90%) as indicated in the Arab Human Development report of 2005, illiteracy remained quite high with a decrease from 62.3% to 49.3% during the aforementioned period. In Tunisia, the early educational reforms had their impact by the beginning of the 1990's; the primary enrolment rate already reached 94% while in Morocco only 57% of students were enrolled in primary education. A significant difference between Tunisia and Morocco can also be determined regarding the feminisation of illiteracy. Whereas in Morocco 61.7% of women were illiterate compared with 26.7% in the case of men in 2003, this data was 34.7% and 16.6% in Tunisia.[29]

With regard to the latest data of UNESCO[30] 2018, the illiteracy rate reached 35.4% among women and 16.7% among men in the age group of 15 years and older. Concerning equal access to the field of education, the net enrolment rate in primary

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[28] See the official webiste of the Institut National de la statistique [n.d.] [INS, National Institute of Statistics, Tunisia.

[29] See the United Nations Development Programme: The Arab Human Development Report 2005. Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World [n.d.], pp. 296, 305.

[30] Organisation des Nations Unies pour l'Éducation, la Science et la Culture. Institut de Statistique de l'UNESCO [n.d.].

education demonstrated an equal development between the two sexes until 2018 when the presence of boys was higher by 1% than that of girls.

According to UNESCO official statistical data,[31] in secondary education, the attendance of girls between 2011 and 2016 exceeded that of boys and nearly doubled between the aforementioned period (see the increase of a 6.6% improvement in 2011 to an improvement of 12.4% in 2016). Concerning the enrolment of women in higher education, it is essential to emphasise that between the period of 2011 and 2019, there was an absolute dominance of women in higher education. In relation to the level of education, contrary to Morocco, Tunisia's rate of illiteracy was only significant in the 65-year age group and older where an illiteracy rate of 81% was present compared with 48.6% in the case of men according to the latest UNESCO statistical data available from 2014.[32]

Indicators	Tunisia		Morocco	
	Women	men	women	Men
Net school enrolment rate – primary education	114.93% (2018) *statistical data from 2019*	115.93% (2018) *statistical data from 2019*	112.73% (2019) 111.51% (2018)	116.69% (2019) 116.11% (2018)
Net school enrolment rate – secondary education	99.32% (2016) vs. 95.28% (2011)	86.9% (2016) vs. 88.63% (2011)	78.18% (2019) vs. 61.52% (2011) *statistical data from 2016*	84.05% (2019) vs. 71.31% (2011) *statistical data from 2016*
Net school enrolment rate – higher education	41.7% (2019)	22.6% (2019)	38.1% (2019)	39.1% (2019)
Literacy rate – 15 years and above	72.2%	86.1%	64.6%	83.3%
Literacy rate – 65 years and above	24.4%	55.8%	19%	51.4%
Participation in the labour force	23.8% (2019)	69.4% (2019)	20.5% (2019)	70.1% (2019)

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[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Ibid*.

Share of seats in parliament	35.9% (2019) 24.9% (2020) 26.3% (2021) 26.3% (2022)	77.4% (2019)	20.5% and 11.7% (Lower House and Upper Chamber; 2019) 20.5% and 11.7% (Lower House and Upper Chamber; 2020) 22.8% and 12.5% (Lower House and Upper Chamber; 2021) 24.1% and 12.5% (Lower House and Upper Chamber; 2022)	81.6% (2019)
Gender Inequality Index	0.296 (2019)		0.454 (2019)	

Table 2. Summary chart of Tunisia and Morocco based on the main indicators of gender inequalities
Source: based on statistical data from the official website of the Organisation of the United Nations for Education, Science and Culture. Statistical Institute of UNESCO
     Tunisia: http://uis.unesco.org/fr/country/tn
     Morocco: http://uis.unesco.org/fr/country/ma?theme=education-and-literacy
     UNDP Human Development Reports: http://hdr.undp.org/en/home
     IPU: https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=1&year=2021

2.2.3. Rural women

Concerning the analysis of gender inequalities in Morocco and Tunisia from an international perspective, the concept of rural women cannot be neglected. The question of rural women is also related to the topic of social and economic marginalisation, which has already been mentioned. The dissertation refers to the CEDAW (*article 14*), since the convention is the only international treaty that recognises the contribution of rural women to the social, economic, and political development of the rural area and addresses their needs through the strengthening of capabilities, security, and opportunities.[33]

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[33] United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women [n.d.a.]

2.2.4. Social and Economic Marginalisation

As both articles 10 and 11 of the CEDAW deal with eliminating obstacles to the equal treatment of women in the field of education and labour, the two articles are applied for the analysis of the social and economic marginalisation of women. Concerning education, the CEDAW aims to reduce the number of women who drop out of school that has increased in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the change in the secular-religious discourse after the Arab Spring. In addition to achieving equality in education, the convention also mentions social security, free choice of work, and equal employment opportunities which should also be guaranteed by each government to ensure equality between the sexes.[34]

When approaching the question of social and economic marginalisation, it is important to emphasise that in Tunisia there is a northern-southern and eastern-western division in terms of socioeconomic aspects. And this division is due to the measures of previous governments that prioritised the development of the northern and coastal (Sahel) parts of the country. This unequal modernisation process also resulted in the marginalisation of the southern and western regions. The Sahel (Tunis–Sousse–Monastir) received 65% of public investment and only 3% of the enterprises were in the western part of Tunisia (Daguzan, 2017, p. 4.).

Liberal feminists believe that women are hindered in achieving equality by sexist division of labour. Therefore, they advocate the reorganisation or redistribution of wealth (Wendell, 1987, p. 66). The analysis of social and economic marginalisation in Tunisia enables us to understand the main aspects of Tunisian feminism and those of Tunisian civil societies regarding the question of gender equality. The approach of Calder-Dawe and Gavey referred to the correlation of feminism and equality, but in a contradictory sense, on one hand, it applies equality as a reference and states that feminism seeks equality between men and women. On the other hand, feminism as a common point starts with inequality, and claims that it can provide a reasonable response to ongoing inequalities (Calder-Dawe – Gavey, 2016, p. 21.).

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[34] *Ibid.*

2.3. Analysis at the Mezzo Level: Main Concepts Related to the Approach of Decision-makers to the Question of Gender Equality

2.3.1. Nation-state building process, institutionalised feminism (state feminism)

In connection with all those challenges the new political leadership in Morocco and Tunisia encountered following their independence, the process of nation-building must be highlighted. In this context, the concept of *institutionalised feminism*, or *state feminism,* is also crucially important for the analysis of the relationship between the different actors, as well as to discover the response and approach of the leadership to those challenges women had to face.

As with the feminist movement, the question of gender equality is characterised by the actions and interactions of different actors, initiatives and measures taken at the international, state, and non-state levels and can have a serious impact on each other. The research also focuses on the political leadership level. The dissertation underlines that while non-state actors also contribute to shaping the political, economic, and social processes of the international order, international relations still remain state centric. This fact will also be reinforced when analysing the complex interdependence through the work of Nye and Keohane.

The nation-state building process in Morocco and Tunisia after their independence is understood in the context of the specific historical characteristics of each country, as well as the struggle of the elite for political power, which had a serious impact on the image of women. This fact was reinforced by Margot Badran (2009) who stated that women's rights movements in the Maghreb derived from the specific social, political, and cultural context of Morocco and Tunisia after the colonial period (Hafez, 2011, pp. 114-115.).

In her work entitled *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (2001), Charrad described the process of state formation of the Maghreb countries in a *kin-based context* and underlined those challenges that sovereign states had to face right after gaining independence from French colonial rule. The major challenge for political powers was the establishment of a political leadership with strong government institutions in such an ethnically, tribally, religiously, and even linguistically fragmented society that was not integrated into the nation (Charrad, 2001, p. 17.). The case of Tunisia is also regarded special since, compared with Morocco, the

weakening of the dominance of tribes brought about an early centralisation in the precolonial period. This centralisation of power then determined the future characteristics of Tunisian politics (Charrad, 2001, p. 87.).

Regarding the concept of modernisation, Willis emphasised that in Tunisia the improvement of women's conditions after the independence of the country was seen more as a sign of development and modernity that Bourguiba exploited as a trump card to counteract the opposition party (Willis, 2014, p. 75.). However, despite the initial efforts achieved in favour of women, the nation-building process later led to the marginalisation of the question of gender equality. Therefore, according to Pepicelli, women's empowerment in Morocco, but mainly in Tunisia reflects a dual process. Similarly, to Badran, she also noted that the new image and role of women differed according to the historical and cultural characteristics of each country (Pepicelli, 2017, pp. 204, 212-213.). The idealised image of women, as part of the nationalist political projects of the leadership, was also called *institutionalised feminism* by Pepicelli, or *state feminism.*

In *The Tunisian Women's Rights Movement: From Nascent Activism to Influential Power-broking* (2017) Tchaicha and Arfaoui described state feminism in a positive context and wrote that state feminism is an efficient tool to respond to the demands of women and improve their social and economic position through different measures and institutions. Tchaicha and Arfaoui also emphasised that previous scholars used an economic approach to analyse the question of state feminism and concluded that rural women are the most affected by the development programs of national and international governments (Tchaicha – Arfaoui, 2017, p. 48.).

In some respects, the concept of state feminism demonstrates a correlation with liberal feminist theory that also worked with social and economic inequalities as reference points. According to Jomier (2011), one of the positive outcomes of state feminism was manifested in the adoption of the *Code du Statut Personnel* (CSP), which improved the situation of women in Tunisia and ensured their privileged position in society. In the absence of a strong presence of non-state actors at the time of Tunisia's independence, the CSP could be adopted without any pressure from women's rights organisations.

Charrad reinforced the argument of Jomier and pointed out that the CSP was introduced right after Tunisia gained its independence from France, at that time there were no

grassroots organisations that could have pushed the government to accept the CSP (Tchaicha – Arfaoui, 2017, p. 49.). While on the one hand, CSP was seen as a progressive measure, on the other hand, Arfaoui concluded that the absence of women demonstrated the inadequacies and limitations at the micro level of society in taking important decisions (Arfaoui, 2007, p. 56.) Based on the aforementioned findings in the literature, the *Code du Statut Personnel* is seen as the manifestation of the *institutionalised feminism* in Tunisia which determined the constraints women's rights organisations had to face in the future.

Contrary to the aforementioned scholars, in *Women in Tunisia: Between State Feminism and Economic Reform* (2003) Murphy described state feminism as an ambiguous concept where interest groups and associations, including women's rights organisations, were seen more as a political tool or a trump card for previous regimes (Murphy, 2003, p. 169.). On the one hand, the political participation of women, the educational reforms, and the representation in the labour market underpinned the privileged status of women, however, on the other hand, a strict control at the non-state actors' level could be observed. This dichotomy is also crucially important from the point of view of the top-down and bottom-up approach to the question of gender equality.

In connection with political participation as an important element of democracy, it must be emphasised that Tunisia stepped on the Scandinavian path of state feminism that brought gender inequalities to the public instead of keeping them in the private sphere. However, the two-fold process of ensuring economic and social improvements for women did not bring about the expectations of Tunisian women, as discrimination, violence against women remained unresolved.

Murphy pointed out the deficiencies of *institutionalised feminism* and compared state-dominated feminism to a treadwheel in which the weaknesses of the system are reinforced at the non-state actors' level, and the outcome is a more marginal position of women. Concerning the circumstances of Tunisian women's rights organisations, Murphy realised that as Tunisian women already found themselves in a privileged position, women's rights NGOs were not obliged to fight for their interests, therefore the culture of feminist political struggle was not evident (Murphy, 2003, pp. 176, 187.).

Referring to the absence of the culture of feminist political struggle, which therefore could not bring about a top-down approach after the period of Tunisia's independence,

in her work entitled *Civil Society in Formation: Tunisia* (1995) Bellin used the concept of '*controlled civisme*' to describe the state's approach to civil society organisations. According to Bellin, Tunisia disposes of those elements that constitute a convenient environment (e.g. heterogeneous society, educated youth capable of triggering change, absence of the intervention of the military in state affairs) for the proliferation of civil societies. On the one hand, previous regimes encouraged the establishment of civil societies. On the other hand, they realised the threat autonomous power blocks can pose on their rule, therefore, during President Bourguiba and Ben Ali, civil societies could only operate under the strict control of the central power (Bellin, 1995, pp. 124-126.). As a consequence, the top-down approach determined the capacities and limits of Tunisian women's rights organisations for a while.

2.4. Analysis at the Micro Level: The International and National Framework of Non-State actors

In the international and national framework of non-state actors the complex interdependence theory of Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane will be mentioned in the theoretical corpus of the dissertation. In light of the feminist theory, Keohane identified the impact of socially constructed gender roles on state behaviour and the international arena as a field where further research is necessary (Keohane, 1998, pp. 193-194.). Geeraerts emphasised the growing role of non-state actors as a new phenomenon following the second half of the 20th century.

Problems related to development issues required solutions from formal and informal groups, while certain, vulnerable groups in society were also in need of development. It was in this context, the so-called bottom-up approach was seen as a significant solution not only from an economic perspective, but from a political one too, which can bring about democracy (Chatty – Rabo, 1997, p. 10.).

As Moghadam highlighted when explaining the significance of women's mobilisation after the Arab Spring, positive changes from the point of view of gender equality require a bottom-up approach with a greater number of women being present at the micro level (women's rights organisations) and in the political sphere. According to the model elaborated in connection with women's empowerment the prerequisites of such processes are education and mobility that bring about access to the labour market,

public sphere and associations. (Moghadam, 2018, pp. 2-3.). The latter one is realised in the formation of different NGOs that all serve to boost women's rights as a common goal. The outcome of women's mobilisation contributes to revealing the relationship between the micro and mezzo level of analysis, primarily when examining whether women's presence is essential to democracy building.

Moghadam also argued that the resolution of the deepening security, economic and social crises necessitate intervention from the government, but thanks to the presence of a strong civic sphere, Tunisian people, including feminist organisations can play an important role in these efforts (Moghadam, 2018, pp. 676-677.). As the empirical part of the dissertation will later explain, the problem-solving skills of women's rights organisations gained importance during the COVID-19 pandemic when they needed to face challenges related to the financing of their organisations and the particular conditions in which vulnerable groups, especially rural women found themselves. These specific circumstances are good examples of the crucial need for sub-state actors and their cooperation, which all serve to complete those areas where the resolution of problems exceeds the competences of those in power.

In her previous work entitled *Women's NGOs in the Middle East and North Africa: Constraints, Opportunities and Priorities* (1997), Moghadam provided a widespread understanding of the formation and proliferation of NGOs in the Middle East and North Africa. The tendency of the creation of non-governmental organisations in this region coincides with the previously explained global trend related to development that appeared from the beginning of the 1970's. Challenges in education and the healthcare system emerged that could have not been resolved anymore by conventional means, e.g. by decision-makers, thus the mobilisation of sub-state actors became inevitable.

In fact, besides economic and political factors, as Moghadam argued, international processes, such as conferences under the auspices of the United Nations, or a greater emphasis on the status of women, good governance, democratisation and development from the 1990's also exerted a great impact on women's rights activists (Moghadam, 1997, pp. 24-32.). In this regard, the main concepts elaborated in the framework of the international conventions and discussed in the previous subchapters meant a guide book for these countries regardless of the cultural or political characteristics. In relation to the classification of women's rights NGOs elaborated by Moghadam, the representatives

questioned in the empirical part come from a quite wide variety of organisations, ranging from affiliation to political parties to women's rights organisations and development research centres. These facts are clear proof that in Tunisia and Morocco a widespread discourse on gender equality had already existed before the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Moreover, the society was more confident in the problem-solving capabilities of sub-state actors than that of decision-makers, but as a result of the political situation women's rights NGOs could only gain ground following the events at the end of 2010.

The concept of interdependence, transnational relations is strictly connected with all those activities that are related to the micro level of analysis. In addition to this, the new phenomenon also raises the question of the traditional role of states (Geeraerts, 1995). Among other experts on the topic, the influence of non-state actors in shaping the traditional state-centric order was discussed by Miller (Miller, 1994, p. 67.) and Ataman (Ataman, 2003, pp. 42-66.) and will be detailed in the following chapter.

Regarding the proliferation of NGOs, or NGO-isation, Islah Jad emphasised that women's rights NGOs in Arabic countries derived from the nationalist efforts (secular nationalism) of these states against the colonial powers as well as their modernisation efforts (Islamic modernism). He shed light on the necessity to reassess the dichotomy of the West versus East in which the West is seen as a power that aims at imposing Western values (materialism, secularism), also called colonial values, on the world. According to the traditional approach NGOs reflect the globalised elite, thus contribute to blurring class borders and destroying the identity and culture of the given state (Jad, 2004 pp. 34, 36.). As previously explained, the researcher agrees that gender roles are socially constructed and tries to bridge the cultural differences by examining how the role of women in shaping the political, economic, social and cultural processes in Morocco and Tunisia is seen in society. This dichotomy will also be explained in detail in the following subchapter.

Related to the formation of women's rights movements as significant players at the micro level, Jad also highlighted the difficulties of the organisational process of Arab women's movements, especially when it comes to connecting women with different backgrounds and interests. Therefore, choosing the target policy and the right platform to advocate the main goals of NGOs is a key task. The organisation of workshops,

conferences or seminars can serve as tools of Moroccan and Tunisian women's rights activists, though, the pandemic limited and narrowed the conventional activities of these organisations (Jad, 2004, pp. 38-39.). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's rights NGOs will also be discussed in the empirical corpus based on the information retrieved from interviews made with representatives of different NGOs.

Another significant point to emphasise before the review of the internal conditions related to the milieu in which women's rights organisations work is the external context of NGOs, which also concerns the mezzo-micro relationship. As Jad has highlighted, the main question to the success of feminist organisations is the political system of the given country, whether those in power show receptivity to introducing reforms. As the example of Tunisia demonstrated, the authoritarian leadership during President Ben Ali chose the co-optation of women's rights NGOs as a strategy to maintain their political rule. Therefore, international conventions can exert a significant impact on the direction women's rights are shaped in Morocco and Tunisia, but sustainable results can only be achieved and maintained if there is a political will for change (Jad, 2004, p. 40.).

Legitimacy is another important factor that must be highlighted when examining the role of women's rights organisations in general. Atack argued that the relationship between the mezzo and micro levels is understood as complementary rather than contradictory. In order to conceptualise non-state actors, Atack evoked Stewart, according to whom the level of NGOs takes place between the individual actors and the state and is manifested in the collective social actions of the individuals (Atack, 1999, p. 855.). The analysis of the micro level is strictly connected with the feminist identity theory and the conditions of the formation of social movements that will be introduced later in the theoretical corpus.

The dissertation focuses on four criteria of the legitimacy of NGOs established by Atack. In this regard, *effectiveness* and *empowerment* must be highlighted. NGOs were created for the resolution of common problems or challenges; therefore, their effectiveness and development capacities cannot be neglected (Atack, 1999, pp. 860-862.). According to Korten, these two characteristics are also crucial for the credibility of these organisations (Korten, 1990, p. 96.). In light of the complex framework of the macro-mezzo and micro levels of analysis, it is important to see that while governments use political order to carry out their tasks, and in their case legitimacy is found in their

authority, NGOs are obliged to adapt to their limited resources. Therefore, in this sense, an ensemble of *effectiveness*, *empowerment*, *representativeness,* and *distinctive values* are important to increase the influence of non-state actors in the decision making process (Atack, 1999, p. 863.).

The above statement on the legitimacy of states and NGOs is in connection with the findings of Keohane and Nye about the impact of complex interdependence on state behaviour and the challenges of the state-centric order. Furthermore, the concept of legitimacy is well tested in light of the political or pandemic crises where the question is whether these circumstances can serve as a catalyst for women's rights organisations to act for the improvement of the socioeconomic and political situation of women. Another key aspect is whether women's rights NGOs in Morocco and Tunisia have all the conditions, effectiveness, empowerment, and funds necessary to implement their main initiatives.

Besides the aforementioned particular conditions, the examination of the relationship between actors at the micro and mezzo levels cannot be neglected either as women's rights groups are often regarded in the broader region as a threat to the state apparatus. However, while logic would say that the proliferation of civil society automatically results in democracy such assumptions must be treated with precaution and aligned with the specific characteristics of each state, also considering the given time period. As an example, conservative regimes consider women's rights NGOs a threat to the rigid state control and general consensus about women (Chatty – Rabo, 1997, pp. 2, 18-19.).

2.5. Gender roles along the secular-religious discourse

Unlike Morocco, the Tunisian discourse on women's rights reflects a particular way in which the roots of identity and the feminist discourse are not strictly related to religion. As mentioned above, the *institutionalised feminism* of Bourguiba was understood in the realm of Western feminism, which also had its impact on women's rights. In this regard, the conditions and role of women in the Maghreb must be analysed along the modernist versus conservative, or secular versus religious discourse. It is also important to emphasise that in Tunisia, contrary to the secular policy of Habib Bourguiba and Zin el-Abidine Ben Ali, the Arab Spring brought about the re-emergence of the Islamist

discourse which resulted in giving Islamist feminism new meaning (Debuysere – Zemni, 2013, p. 15.). The thesis will complete the Western interpretation of the concept of feminism and feminist identity theory by referring to the different types of feminist movements in Islam, i.e., *'Islamic feminism'*, *'Muslim feminism'* and *'Islamist feminism'* (Bouzghaia, 2020, p. 78.).

Bouzghaia quotes Fatima Sadiqi (2020, pp. 49-67) and states that during the 20th century, the struggle of women in the Maghreb must be understood in the context of colonialism, nationalism, modernisation, post colonialism, decolonisation, political Islam, and democratisation (Bouzghaia, 2020, pp. 73-74.). Conceptualising the religious discourse allows the researcher to eliminate the limits of the Western perspective of the stance of women, which resulted in the neglect of cultural realities from the research. Arfaoui highlighted that the traditional practice of the religious principle is regarded as the reason behind the social and cultural inequalities of women (Arfaoui, 2007, pp. 53-55.).

In general, there is a widespread understanding that the question of gender equality in Muslim societies was shaped by Islam and secularism and their relationship to each other. By shedding light on the fact that authoritarian leaders used the *'women's rights card'* strategy to oppress religious discourse, Tripp further reinforced the religious versus secular opposition in terms of women's rights (Bouzghaia, 2020, p. 73.). For secular leaders, the improvement of women's rights was strictly intertwined with the modernisation efforts of political leaders in the post-independence era.

Concerning feminism in the Maghreb and in the Middle East in general, the name of Margot Badran must be mentioned. Contrary to the previous findings which separated secular and Islam feminism from each other, she stated that the two types of discourse are strictly intertwined and in fact secular feminism is Islamic and Islamic feminism is secular. Badran emphasised that secular feminism is a more comprehensive discourse than Islamic feminism, since secular feminism includes Islamic modernists as well. Moreover, Badran pointed out that Middle Eastern feminism is not an imported concept from the West, but originated in the region. In this sense, Middle Eastern feminism is the result of the given historical context, the religious, ethnic, and class structures that continued to shape feminism in the MENA region (Hafez, 2011, pp. 114-115.).

The main findings of Badran (2009) can be related to the state-building process of each political leader following the independence of the analysed countries. Similarly, to Badran, Mernissi believed in the compatibility of Islam, democracy, and human rights, including the compatibility between Islam and gender equality. Mernissi boasted that gender equality is a merit of Muslim tradition and not a value imported from the West. Therefore, Mernissi regarded the efforts and achievements of women's rights activist in the MENA as their own achievements, which significantly improved their position compared to women in the West (Mernissi, 1991, p. 8.). The results of the research demonstrated that while similarities exist between Western feminism and feminism of the Maghreb, the latter one cannot be analysed in the Western context, otherwise it risks the generalisation of the status and role of women in the Maghreb.

Moghissi approached the question of Maghreb feminism from a different aspect than that of Badran. She also pointed out that the root of feminism in the Maghreb must be traced back to the specific historical characteristics of each country in the region. However, contrary to Badran, she described the initiatives of women's right activists in the region as a countermovement. Using the example of Algeria, Moghissi said that in fact, it was the *'civilising'* and *'liberating'* gender policy of the colonial power that reinforced the Islamic identity of women (Moghissi, 1999, p. 35.). Thus, instead of defining who we are, we better describe who we are not.

To understand the feminist discourse in the MENA, it is essential to return to Valentine Moghadam's categorisation of feminist movements in the region. Moghadam distinguished the following categories from each other: *Islamist*, *Muslim,* and *Islamic* feminism. The differences between each category are found in the reference points. *Islamist feminism* is the traditional discourse that is built on the strict interpretation of religious texts; therefore, it rejects gender equality as being considered a Western concept. The category of *Muslim feminism* involves the secular discourse on women's rights in the specific religious and cultural context of the Middle East and Maghreb countries (Moghadam, 2003, p. 7, 26-27.).

However, Moghadam pointed out that secular feminists in the Arab world aim to place women's rights in the context of universal human rights, therefore this approach is closer to the Western interpretation of the stance of women (Moghadam, 2003, p. 7.). Concerning the third classification, it can be said that *Islamic feminism* is the middle

ground between the aforementioned two ends. Islamic feminism neither rejects traditional principles nor refuses a more flexible policy towards women's rights.

Representatives of Islamic feminism believe that the inferior position of women in the Arab world is the result of the masculine interpretation of the Quran. To eliminate the default, representatives of this discourse apply a more progressive approach and advocate the role of women in the reinterpretation of religious texts (Bouzghaia, 2020, pp. 77-78.). It is crucial to see that feminist movements in the MENA also show some overlaps. The findings of Moghadam also reinforced the previous conclusions of Moghissi (1999) and Badran (2009), which underlined that the status and role of women in the Arab world requires a complex analysis that not only includes the historical, political and cultural context of each country examined, but also takes into account the international framework of women's rights.

As a consequence of the concept of the religious-secular discourse, understanding the coexistence of tradition and modernity and the presence of an ethnically, tribally, culturally fragmented society is indispensable for the analysis of women's rights in the Maghreb. The country specificities of Morocco and Tunisia are also important from the perspective of the role of Islam in the shaping of gender patterns. As Chatty and Rabo underlined Islam is neither more nor less patriarchal than any other religion, therefore analysing women's rights only through the lens of religion would lead to generalisation. The struggle women have to face in the region is the result of the way gender roles were created and have been shaped by society for centuries (Chatty – Rabo, 1997, p. 13.). At this point, the dissertation refers again to the continuous process of the formulation and reformulation of gender roles by society and the influence individuals and women's rights organisations can exert on actors present at the mezzo level of analysis.

The dissertation gives importance to the inclusion of the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights and its revised version, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's Declaration on Human Rights (ODHR) when discussing the question of gender equality on a secular and religious basis, though none of the documents are binding. The declaration was born from the split between promoters of the liberal Western values and those who emphasised the need of the preservation of traditional values in the emerging world order. Despite reference to the protection of human life, the human right to education and medical and social care, the shortcomings of the Cairo Declaration on Human

Rights is that the document did not provide individual equality and non-discrimination, especially in the case of gender rights and rights of non-Muslims. Article 6 only mentions equality in human dignity without specifying right to work or cultural rights.[35]

The way countries of the OIC saw human rights also triggered a conflict with human rights activists in the West and led to the revision of the CDHR from the 2010s. The new version that eliminated Islamic superiority from the preamble and envisioned women's greater access to education, health care and employment was planned to be adopted during the meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the OIC in April 2020, but the pandemic situation rewrote the initial plans. Although ODHR was elaborated to show more flexibilities to Western values and norms, the new document did not mention guarantees regarding freedom of speech and association. These deficiencies mean serious constraints from the point of view of the formation of women's rights NGOs.

Another important aspect of the ODHR is the question of implementation. As has been mentioned, the international organisations had already set up a broadly accepted framework for human rights, including the question of gender equality, therefore, most OIC member states will likely use the UN conventions over those of the OIC when it comes to legislation (Kayaoglu, 2020, pp. 1, 5-8.). This is particularly true in the case of Tunisia and Morocco where the equal participation of women in political life, the assurance of equal rights for men and women in all fields of life and the fight to tackle violence committed against women are ensured even in the constitution of the countries.[36]

As the aforementioned findings show, Islam is no more patriarchal than any other religion, the shaping of women's rights is the reflection of the presence of traditional values of the given society and the way decision-makers envision the evolution of women's rights. As a consequence, the examination of the topic of gender equality requires the separation of the private and the public spheres of the society. This separation will be analysed in detail in the following chapter. Although modernisation took place in the public sphere as a sign of development, the question of personal

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[35] See the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, Aug. 5, 1990, U.N. GAOR, World Conf. on. Hum. Rts. 4th Sess., Agenda Item 5, U.N. Doc. [n.d.].

[36] See Constitution de la République Tunisienne (Constitution of the Tunisian Republic) [n.d.]. and La Constitution Edition 2011. Documentation Juridique Marocaine (The 2011 Edition of the Constitution. Moroccan Juridical Documentation) [n.d.].

matters, such as the personal status code, remained a private issue for each country where concessions must also have been made to satisfy the demands of the conservative segment of society (Pepicelli, 2017, pp. 212-213.).

3. THEORETICAL CORPUS

The literature review enabled the researcher to summarise the main concepts, indicators, and processes that will be used during the operationalisation. Going beyond the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of equality of the sexes, feminism is a complex theory that takes different forms, therefore no single feminist perspective can be highlighted (Plummer – Young, 2010, p. 307.). The theoretical corpus organised in the systematic order according to the macro, mezzo and micro levels of analysis provides a solid framework for the dissertation. As it has already been mentioned in the previous chapter, the research does not apply a specific theory on the supranational level as the main principles (e.g., *discrimination based on gender, rural women social and economic marginalisation*) are defined by the international community, though, they reflect a Western perspective. Concerning the national scope of analysis, the relationship between the supranational and state actors will be examined through the *feminist IR theory* of Tickner, Scott and Enloe. In this regard, the dissertation analyses whether the Moroccan and Tunisian decision makers' approach to the question of gender equality brought about '*gendered'* international relations (Keohane, 1998, p. 193.). Moreover, the feminist IR perspective also enables the researcher to examine how the feminist discourse changed during the different periods of time and to what extent they influenced non-state actors.

The second theory, Connell's *gender order theory* (*hegemonic masculinity*), and its redefinition are strictly related to feminist IR theory, since the gender order theory aims to find answers to the dominance of masculine norms. According to Jewkes and Morrell, "*hegemonic masculinity is a set of values established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organize society in gender unequal ways. It combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy.*" (Jewkes et al, 2015, p. 113.)

Regarding the analysis of the micro level, three theories will be applied to find an answer to the formation of social movements, including the main motivations (*feminist identity theory* of Downing and Roush and *the social movement theory* of Oberschall),

as well as the limits of women's rights activists. *Feminist identity theory* is of crucial importance to find an answer to the question of which circumstances drive non-state actors towards stepping up for the mutual benefits of a certain group and how these efforts result in the establishment of civil societies. Taking into account the growing influence of NGOs on global processes from the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, which also resulted in the transformation of the strongly state-centric world order, the dissertation works with the *complex interdependence theory* of Robert O. Keohane and Joseph Nye. The need to examine in more depth the shaping of gender patterns at the level of non-state actors is also explained by Keohane's criticism of Tickner's feminist IR theory. As mentioned above, Keohane stated that the impact of the so-called domestic level on international and transnational relations remains an area where further analysis is necessary to reveal the process of socially constructed gender roles (Keohane, 1998, pp. 193-194.).

Referring to the method of process-tracing, the dissertation applies deduction following the review of all the relevant theories. Due to the establishment of the main concepts of the research, this method enables the researcher to draw consequences from the findings of the theoretical corpus which will then be tested in the empirical part of the dissertation. On the one hand, according to the main prerequisites of the research, Keohane (1998) has highlighted that socially constructed gender roles have a crucial impact on state behaviours. On the other hand, states are also bound by the supranational framework of women's rights, which, in some cases restricts their freedom of manoeuver. The role of non-state actors is also limited by the different approaches of decision makers to the question of gender equality, which, as has been mentioned, depends on the historical, social and economic, but mainly political circumstances. Put into the international relations framework, this means that anarchy does exist a little at the non-state actor level, and is greater at the supranational level. However, this anarchy can be managed by top-down or bottom-up approaches of the different political and social actors in which both state and women's rights organisations play a supplementary role.

3.1. Theoretical corpus at the mezzo level

3.1.1. Feminist IR theory

When approaching the question of women's participation in the political and economic field and analysing the causes of existing inequalities between men and women in general, regardless of the current pandemic situation, the dissertation examines the discipline of international relations from a feminist approach. It is crucially important to emphasise that the main point of view of feminist research is to shed light on the marginal situation of women and to emphasise and offer a solution to improve the condition of women to achieve the same rights as men. Without doubt, the appearance of feminist IR theory brought a new perspective to the discipline of international relations and posed new questions that focused on the security seeking characteristic of state-centric order which results in oppressive hierarchies of power (Tickner, 2006, pp. 25, 40-41.).

Regarding feminist IR theory, the name of Ann Tickner must be mentioned who, – based on the marginalisation of women in policymaking and the presence of different stereotypes – described international relations as male-dominated, also called deeply *'gendered'* international relations. According to Tickner (1992), the elimination of gender hierarchies requires a more equal, approximately 50% of female participation in all levels of decision making, including foreign and military policymaking. As the role of women in society is shaped by various social and cultural norms that often serve as constraints in achieving gender equality, these inequalities penetrate not only the international political level, but also the internal political arena, where measures of decision makers are taken accordingly. This fact in the political field was also reinforced by Enns, who applied a political approach and drew a correlation between gender equality and the political context. She stated that equality and justice for women can be achieved by changing the actual political context (Enns, 1997, p. 199.).

Reference to R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity is important to better understand the origins of the unequal relationship between men and women. In his work, *Gender and Power* Connell stated that the dominance of men over women is a culturally idealised form created by the society that helps to maintain patriarchal social order (Jewkes et al., 2015, p. 113.). Similarly, to R.W. Connell, Joan Scott also shed light on the fact that gendered relationships are, in fact, power relations that derive from

the traditional division of roles between the sexes (*private* versus *public* sphere) which further reinforces women's inferior status in the political arena (Scott, 1986, p. 1069.). Radical feminist Cynthia Enloe developed a different approach when examining inequalities between men and women and, instead of analysing the causes of weak participation of women in key decision making processes, she tried to find an answer to the *absence of women* in the fields of politics and security (Code, 2000, p. 272.). Thus, contrary to the previous arguments, Enloe stated that in fact women are present in the political and military arena, but institutional processes have always reinforced the dominance of men over women.

Tickner emphasised that military and foreign policymaking are those fields that have always been attributed to men who traditionally represent *patriotism, strength, power, autonomy*, and *rationalism* compared with the female features of *naivety* and *weakness*. Regarding other gendered indicators, she also specified such masculine characteristics as *force*, *violence,* or *defence*. However, in light of the consequences of the pandemic on women, it is interesting that while in the public sphere security and violence were always attributed to men, women in the private sphere have always been the biggest victims of domestic violence. This vulnerable situation of women inside the state is also reflected in the relationship of states with other states, therefore manifesting itself in the foreign policy making (aggressive versus conflict avoidant) of a certain country (Tickner, 1992, pp. 8-9, 24, 38, 96.). Moreover, as has previously been mentioned, *violence on the international level penetrates into the domestic level*, thus the public and private spheres are strictly interrelated. In this regard, a significant point of view of the research in Chapter 4 (case studies) will be whether the dominance of the masculine or feminine gender patterns exerts any influence on the number of violent cases against women following the outbreak of the pandemic in Morocco and Tunisia.

The socially and culturally shaped patterns are important from the point of the analysis of the role women can play in the process of democratisation and the approach of decision-makers towards the treatment of the question of gender equality, as this issue has already been formulated in the methodological part of the research. Similarly, to Tickner, previous feminist studies also revealed a correlation between militarisation, patriarchy, and gender inequality. Elveren and Moghadam evoked Cynthia Enloe's prominent work from 1983 and emphasised that the militarist culture of certain countries reinforced patriarchy, which as a result had a significant impact on the

development of masculine and feminist norms. Furthermore, Enloe also shed light on the infiltration of masculine norms into the private and public spheres of society (Elveren – Moghadam, 2019, pp. 1-2.) that then affect women's and men's equal access to basic social and healthcare services, not to mention the question of political representation.

Following the demonstration of the Gender Inequality Index (GII), other social indicators, the classification of Tunisia and Morocco by Freedom House in Chapter 4 and the empirical testing of the social, political, and economic processes in Chapter 5 the dissertation concludes *whether the male-dominated orientation of politics can be changed by a more female-centric one*. However, it is without doubt that the role of women's rights activists, local and regional NGOs is indisputable in such changes, and the social movement theory, the theory of complex independence, and the feminist identity theory will contribute to understanding the basis of the mobilisation of non-state actors.

The reinforcement of the so-called *hierarchical order* or *hierarchies* between men and women is strongly linked to the theory of hegemonic masculinity, which will be discussed in the following subchapter. In this regard, as has been mentioned, *hierarchies* are the result of the consolidation of the patriarchal order that Enloe also highlighted in connection with an increased military expenditure. It cannot be neglected that Tickner also considered the socialisation of masculine patterns and the power politics responsible for the evolution of hierarchical gender roles (Tickner, 1992, p. 9.) (e.g. men as heads of families in the private sphere, women responsible for household activities; men as decision makers in the public sphere). Thus, at this point, the feminist trend in IR, which is a Western approach to find answers to gender inequalities, shows some overlap with Islamic feminism. The latter also used the distinction in gender roles as a reference and explained the inferior position of women with the masculine interpretation of the Quran. Distinction between gender roles and socialisation along traditional and conservative patterns will be important when analysing the post-Arab Spring period, namely the drafting of the new Tunisian constitution, where the *complementarity clause* (Norbakk, 2016, p. 8.) led to widespread controversy between men and women.

Regarding *gendered* international relations, it is crucial to mention Tickner's approach to the idealisation of women's participation in international politics. In her booked entitled *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* she argued that the increasing women's participation in decision making and achieving common security cannot be carried out without eliminating the hierarchical order (Tickner, 1992, pp. 9, 18.). On the one hand, the 30% requirement of women's participation in national parliaments, also set as a goal by the Optional Protocol of the CEDAW,[37] is still a long way to being achieved in Tunisia and Morocco. However, the incorporation of feminist studies into IR from the 1980s and Tickner's question of *what if women were also involved in foreign policy making* is also a positive sign as it draws the attention of decision makers to the importance of the question of women's empowerment and the redefinition of security.

Evoking the previous findings of Scott and Connell, Tickner believed that the main obstacle in front of bringing women into the field of decision making in foreign policy and military affairs lies in the fact that the field of IR has always been *entirely male-centric* throughout the past centuries, which completely hid the unequal gender relations. In this regard, Tickner identified the contradictory norms (e.g. *public* versus *private* sphere, *reason* versus *emotion,* or *objective* versus *subjective*) *exploited by the society* responsible for the consolidation of a patriarchal society which is most apparent in international relations. Remaining within the framework of domination and subordination and taking into account the anarchic characteristic of international relations, another important question will be whether order and control can be restored (Tickner, 1992, pp. 10-11.). Therefore, the dissertation returns to Keohane's main criticism of Tickner's feminist trend in IR, which called for the need for the examination of the shaping of gender patterns at the micro level of analysis (Keohane, 1998, pp. 193-194.).

As the dissertation proposed a complex framework of analysis in which both specific political, social, economic, and cultural characteristics of Morocco and Tunisia played a key role in the destruction and reconstruction of gender patterns, another important feature of contemporary feminism must be highlighted, which explains while feminist IR theory is regarded as a convenient theory for the research. Whereas liberal feminism blamed the legal framework for the presence of gender inequalities, contemporary

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[37] See Inter-Parliamentary Union (2003).

feminists offered a complex and deeper approach which surpassed these legal barriers and took into consideration the social, cultural, and economic obstacles, too. In this sense, radical feminists, for example, Cynthia Enloe, refer to the existence of *patriarchal* society (Enloe, 2016, p. 5.) as we could see in the case of a country's approach to the question of militarisation. Another important point is the standpoint of contemporary (postmodern) feminism that aimed to overwrite the previous experiences of feminism that derived from Western feminism (Tickner, 1992, pp. 14-15.) and therefore proposed a quite biased picture of the question of gender equality. The contemporary feminist view has significance in the research from the point of view of the religious versus secular discourse on women's rights.

The idealisation of woman-centric international relations suggested by Tickner brings us closer to a new model of security seeking and foreign policy making, namely because even feminists themselves are divided about whether women's participation in military affairs is the right way to ensure gender equality. Some of them believe that the traditionally feminist attributions, e.g. peace, should prevail in the public sphere too. However, this approach is quite interesting as the current view of security seeker would be replaced by a peace seeker behaviour (Tickner, 1992, p. 41.), which not only rewrote the current trend of international relations, but would result in the changing of roles at the micro level too.

Similarly, to Tickner, Scott also stated that gender is a socially constructed concept that affects different areas of life and that the hierarchical order Tickner referred to is the outcome of the traditional male-female division of the different social, economic, cultural, or political norms. Scott approached the position of women from a historical perspective and applied qualitative research that focused on the questions of *why* or *when* women were absent from history (Scott, 1986, pp. 1057-1059, 1070, 1072, 1074.). This is a crucial aspect from the point of view of the dissertation, which also formulated detailed qualitative questions in the methodological part of the research. The absence of women is seen as a common standpoint between radical feminists, i.e. Cynthia Enloe and Scott. Moreover, Enloe emphasised the intertwining of national and global security and concluded that greater mobilisation in the field of militarisation has a great impact on the given position of the state in international relations. In addition to Tickner and other scholars of international relations, Enloe also held the process of militarisation responsible for the marginalisation of women in all fields of society. According to

Enloe, the superiority of the stronger sex led to stigmatisation and victimisation of women (Enloe, 2016, pp. 54, 56.).

Understanding the subordination of women, the deconstruction and reproduction of masculine identities, and the impacts these processes have on the behaviour of states in the international arena was of crucial importance. According to Cynthia Enloe, women are also present in the political field, but the existing unequal structures, the institutionalised politics and the split between the public and private spheres (Enloe, 1993, p. 457.) keep their voices away from being heard.

The findings of Valentine Moghadam must also be highlighted in connection with the institutionalised and unequal political structures that continue to reproduce and reinforce the subordination of women. The nation-state building and institutionalised feminism mentioned in the conceptual framework of the dissertation are good examples of this process. According to Moghadam, the institutional legacy of the past, the role of women's rights organisations before and after the transition and the political establishment of a country have a crucial impact on the question of women's rights. In this regard, she refers to the main findings of previous studies in the field of women and democracy (e.g. Steven Fish and Eva R. Bellin) and argues that one of the major obstacles in the way of achieving gender equality in the MENA lies in the repressive political culture of these countries. In this regard, the name of Cynthia Enloe can be evoked, who, as previously mentioned, drew a parallel between the consolidation of certain institutional norms and the absence of women in decision making (Code, 2000, p. 272.). It is also of great importance to note that, on the other hand, Moghadam stated that the growing emergence of women's rights NGOs in the MENA region since the 1990s is proof that there is strong will among young people to carry out significant changes in terms of women's rights too (Moghadam, 2016, pp. 139, 141.).

One of the most important criticisms of the feminist discourse of international relations includes Western bias (Western concepts of security, male-female attributions, etc.) that is significant from the point of view that the research applies a comparative case study of two Muslim countries (Tickner, 1992, p. 9.). In this sense, a more regional-specific analysis is inevitable for an in-depth understanding of the specificities of Morocco and Tunisia that takes into consideration not only the historical, political, but also the regional characteristics. Another criticism is that while the involvement of feminism

offers an alternative of liberalism and realism in international relations, the concept of security is restricted to its realistic understanding elaborated by Morgenthau. Thus, the feminist IR approach offers a rather limited scope for analysis.

A further remark includes the concept of gender and women that often merge into each other, making the separation of these two concepts more difficult. Fernández and Valdés refer to True and underline that the final conclusions related to the question of masculinisation and gendered international relations require the examination of the local characteristics of the given country or countries (Fernández – Valdés, 2016, pp. 48-49, 55-57.). As previously mentioned, this idea was shared by Robert O. Keohane (1998) when referring to Tickner's concept of *gendered* international relations.

Following the theory of gender order developed by Connell, the dissertation deals with the specificities of Morocco and Tunisia deriving from the society and non-state actors that are embedded in the framework of complex interdependence where all actors are responsible for deconstructing and reconstructing feminine norms.

3.1.2. Gender order theory

Hegemonic masculinity as part of the gender order theory is strictly linked to the feminist identity theory which seeks to find an answer to the question of why women are found in a more marginal position than that of men when it comes to the field of economy, politics, or society. While the theory contributes to better understanding the complexity of the question of gender inequalities, it is also deeply rooted in the Western cultural framework. Therefore, it can only be applied as a supplementary and not an all-inclusive approach for the researcher. The reason for choosing gender order theory is explained by the fact that the concept of hierarchy and its consolidation and overwriting constitute key areas of the dissertation, and the researcher analyses the process of deconstruction and reconstruction of these hierarchies. Regarding the topic of deconstruction and reconstruction of gender norms, Acker argued that in fact the consolidation of women's subordination is a long process consisting of five stages. The first step is the traditional male-female division (e.g. division of labour), followed by symbols, gendered social structures that penetrate in the individual, the organisational level and in social structures as a last step (Acker, 1990, pp. 146-147.).

Remaining at the question of dominance and subordination, Connell operated with the notion of power, inequality, identity, patriarchy, and the interaction of different actors that all result in the superiority of men over women and other men as well. Contrary to Tickner, Enloe, or other feminist scholars of international relations, Connell emphasised that the consolidation of hierarchical order of masculine and feminine behaviours and norms is the result of the cultural ideal of each country, thus must be examined in this context. Moreover, Connell determined the intention and attitude of women responsible for the replication of these ideals (Jewkes et al., 2015, pp. 113-114.). Here, the theoretical corpus returns to the exploitation of the traditional male-female division and attributions (e.g., men represent power, violence, strength, whereas women are depicted as emotional and weak whose roles are limited to household activities).

As a critical question, Jewkes et al. underlined that hegemonic masculinity is a social construction, which means that in the event of strong intent on the side of men and women, the hierarchies mentioned above can be changed through the process of deconstruction and reconstruction (Jewkes et al., 2015, p. 118.). This aspect will be crucially important when analysing the main motivations and mobilisation of women's rights activists in relation to the impact they have on decision makers both in theory and practice. In this regard, the interviews in Chapter 5 will shed light on how the determination to carry out change is implemented on the individual level of analysis.

3.2. Theoretical corpus at the micro level

3.2.1. Theory of complex interdependence

To analyse to what extent global and regional efforts contributed to the formation of women's rights movements, thus influencing the activities/initiatives of the decision makers in Morocco and Tunisia, the dissertation applies the work of Joseph S. Nye and Robert O. Keohane entitled *Transnational Relations and World Politics: An Introduction* (1971). This work is crucially important from the point of view that both international relations experts shed light on the changes in the international political arena from the 1970s and 1980s and emphasised the phenomenon of complex interdependence produced by the appearance of new political actors, i.e. non-state actors and their growing influence on decision makers.

In his book published in 1994, Miller pointed out the more complex features of international political processes and emphasised that the traditional state-centric order was replaced by a transnational system as a result of the increasing level of political, economic and cultural transactions (Miller, 1994, p. 67.). Therefore, the complexity of the new political order also evoked the need to solve and establish a discourse on previously marginalised, but crucially important topics (including women's empowerment) whose resolution required an active contribution from various nongovernmental organisations. With regard to the new political actors in international relations, it is also important to distinguish between intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and transnational or international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). In this regard, only the second category brought into being by non-state actors is called transnational, as it was created to delegate on them those tasks governments were unable to cope with. While on the one hand, nobody can deny that the traditional political order remains state-centric, on the order hand, we cannot contest the fact that through their mobilisation and monitoring, activists and regional organisations also exert a significant influence in certain contexts not only on public opinion but on the measures of governments too. The question that divides experts in international relations lies in the real effectiveness of non-state actors and the impact they have on their respective governments (Ataman, 2003, pp. 42-66.).

Nye and Keohane also emphasised that states are not the only actors of world politics, but in certain cases nongovernmental actors have a greater impact on international processes than states themselves. Their research mainly focused on the possible impact of the loss of control on governments, whether state-centric analysis can still be maintained in IR research, the beneficiaries of the new political order and the challenges and future of international organisations as a result of the process of complex interdependence. Regarding the difference between interstate and transnational activities similarly to Miller's statement, Nye and Keohane claimed that contrary to interstate activities the main characteristics of transnational interactions are that they involve non-state actors as well. Regarding the direct role nongovernmental organisations play in influencing events in the international political arena, Nye and Keohane highlighted that in this sense non-state entities bypass their governments (Nye – Keohane, 1971, pp. 331-332, 336-337.).

The analysis of the evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia attaches importance to the five effects of transnationalism on state behaviour stated by Nye and Keohane. These include the following changes: changes in attitude, the emergence of international pluralism, limitations on states to manoeuver as a result of the alteration of the traditional state-centric order, an increased ability to influence other governments, and a more significant role of non-state actors that in some cases tend to overwrite the priorities and policies of governments (Nye – Keohane, 1971, pp. 331-332, 336-337.).

Although *interdependence* in the theory of interdependence means the interaction between states and different actors of the international arena, the dissertation tightens this interpretation to the question of states and sub-state actors' relationship. Rana underlined that complex interdependence is the answer to realism and liberalism in international relations, which is evident, as the question of militarisation and national security do not constitute a central part of this theory, though they remain relevant (Rana, 2015, pp. 290-291, 295-296). Instead, international issues that transcend national borders, including the question of gender inequality, brought into being the intrastate, regional, and even international cooperation of non-state actors, which all had significant consequences on state behaviour. As has been mentioned in the analysis of the mezzo level, according to the feminist scholars of IR, militarisation and national security are strictly intertwined with gender inequality and are understood through the lens of the public versus private sphere dichotomy.

As Nye and Keohane or Rada have emphasised, the technological development beginning at the end of the 1970s brought about such new challenges that erased the traditional borders of the nation-states. However, this changing environment did not mean that the traditional state-centric order came to an end.

The appearance of non-state entities restricted some roles of states but did not result in the creation of a fragmented state system. In fact, the creation and influence of non-state actors is crucially important in the solution of some issues that overpass the competence of states. However, it cannot be neglected that non-state actors can only operate in a peaceful international system and their work requires international consensus (Inass, 2021, pp. 33-34, 37.). In this regard, it should not be forgotten, too, that while the internationally established framework of women's rights (CEDAW, EU recommendations on women's rights, etc.) constitutes a guideline for states and non-

state entities it also formulate their demands, states must find an efficient and reasonable strategy on how to manoeuver and carry out their interests between these two levels.

3.2.2. Social movement theory

As has been mentioned in the methodological part, the research also applies the framework of the social movement theory of Anthony Oberschall when analysing the level of non-state actors. It is of utmost importance to underline that social movements cannot be explained by one single concept. According to DeFronzo and Gill, the main aims of social movements can be summarised in the following statement: "Social movements are created to *find answer to a certain problem*, usually *mobilize large masses of people for the sake of achieving common benefits or resisting against social issues* they believe would be harmful to the whole society" (DeFronzo – Gill, 2020, p. 27.).

Jenkins further reinforced the main findings of Oberschall, mentioned in the methodological part, and stated that grievances are constant elements of triggering the formation of social movements. As a consequence, social conflicts of interest, long-term changes in the resources and/or opportunities of the group, as well as changes in power relations, are considered necessary circumstances that lead to the rise of collective actions (Jenkins, 1983, pp. 528, 530.). In addition to changes in opportunities and the appearance of new challenges, as Korten emphasised, the legitimacy of NGOs requires effectiveness and empowerment, the latter of which is related to the ability of an organisation to attract a large number of individuals (Korten, 1990, p. 96.).

Yadav also highlighted the need for collective action, whether it is a formal or informal attempt, the creation of interest and awakening and the orientation of bringing about social change are necessary conditions for the formation of social movements. However, compared to previous findings in connection with social movements, Yadav also emphasised the importance of the duration of social movements and stated that these formations can only be considered social movements if they last for a longer period (Yadav, 2015, p. 2.).

Referring to the further findings of DeFronzo and Gill, it can be said that some overlaps can be found between different social movements. Feminist movements deconstruct and rebuild existing stereotypes about women in order to realise their goal of achieving

gender equality. Therefore, feminist movements are also classified as identity movements. On the other hand, feminist movements also demonstrate similarities with reform movements, as representatives of both social movements attempt to overthrow existing norms to trigger change they believe would be beneficial for the whole society (DeFronzo – Gill, 2020, pp. 27-28.). The shaping of masculine and female norms is related to the research question of whether the public and private sphere division can be abolished and whether such changes would bring about a significant and quality development in terms of political and civil rights in Morocco and Tunisia.

3.2.3. Feminist identity theory

Regardless of whether efforts to establish gender equality were a conscious project in the nation-state building process after the independence of Morocco and Tunisia, it is indisputable that women's rights activists also played an important role in the shaping of political, economic, and social norms and traditions.

The research has already dealt with the main viewpoints of feminism in IR on the macro level and the position of non-state actors in the complex framework of international relations, but has not yet analysed those circumstances and personal motivations that pushed women to take their destiny in hand and act to eradicate gender inequalities. In this regard, Dunst's work, entitled *Feminist Identity Theory: Downing and Roush's Model of Positive Feminist Identity Development* (2017) contribute to understanding the personal motivations that drove women in the Maghreb to fight for achieving equal rights. The model of Downing and Roush enables the researcher to have a wider view on the process of the development of feminist identity. The model consists of six stages, which starts from the passive acceptance of inequalities and arrives at the stage of revelation.

According to Downing and Roush (1985), external factors, namely crises and the experience of concrete phenomena, contribute to accelerating the stage of revelation. In Tunisia, the general dissatisfaction due to unequal opportunities in education, the labour market, and political participation raised awareness among women and resulted in upper-class women taking the role for the benefit of other female members of society in the hope of achieving their emancipation after independence.

The same efforts could be seen during the Arab and post-Arab Spring period in Tunisia, where the oppression experienced during the autocratic rule of the first two presidents and the threat of the emergence of Islamists pushed women to a greater participation in the events of 2011. The same aspirations of women's rights activists were also present in Morocco, manifested in lifting some of the country's reservations to the CEDAW (Darhour – Dahlerup, 2020, p. 15.). Another milestone in crises is the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, on the one hand, deepened gender inequalities, but, on the other hand, could be seen as a catalyst for improving women's conditions.

On the last two stages of the model of Downing and Roush, women are committed to act in order to achieve change, therefore, interaction comes into being. Despite the creation of a model that demonstrated the gradual development of feminist identity, the work of Downing and Roush contains some deficiencies. Feminist identity theory also has its own limits: the theory does not precise those interpersonal, institutional, and cultural factors that play an important role in women's struggle for equality (Downing – Roush, 1985, p. 696.). The conduct of interviews in the empirical part will help to overcome these deficiencies.

In relation to the fifth and sixth stages of the feminist identity development model of Downing and Roush, during the conduct of interviews, the research examines which factors are crucially important in the mobilisation of women's rights activists and civil society organisations. In this regard, Weldon saw the number and influence of women's organisations, the visibility of women's rights activists (e.g. appearance in the media), press accounts of their activities, the proliferation of research centres, agencies, and the presence of women in different domains as important indicators that demonstrate all the circumstances available to women's rights activists in the commitment stage (Weldon, 2002). The representatives of women's rights NGOs interviewed also underlined the necessity and importance of different platforms, regional cooperation in the bottom-up approach to the question of gender equality.

It is important to note that in some respects Downing and Roush's feminist identity theory shows some overlaps with the social movement theory of Oberschall. *Dissatisfaction* and *belief in the ability to trigger change* are regarded as mutual conditions for the mobilisation of non-state actors in both theories. However, compared with the social movement theory, feminist identity theory does not take into

consideration the importance of external factors (e.g. changes in the political environment or compliance with exigencies of the international arena) in the activities of non-state actors aimed at changing the order of hegemonic masculinity.

Based on the above definitions of the secular versus Islamic discourse on women's rights, the feminist IR approach, the theory of complex interdependence and the theories of social movement and feminist identity, the following model demonstrates the complex and overarching framework of state and non-state actors.
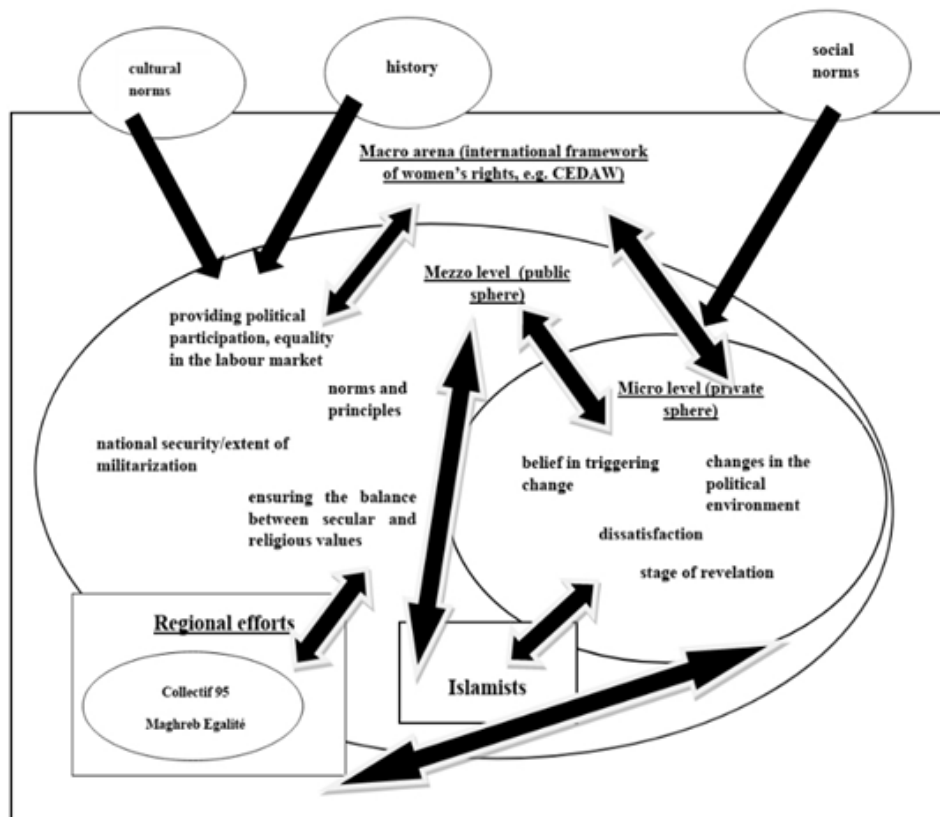

Figure 2. The framework of state and non-state actors

4. THE CASE STUDY OF MOROCCO AND TUNISIA

This chapter contains the historical, economic, social, and cultural context in which the case study of Morocco and Tunisia is examined. The subchapters follow a logical structure, the *general background* provides brief but straightforward information on women's rights, and the part of *post-Arab Spring era* demonstrates the major changes, discourses, and achievements related to the shaping of gender patterns. The *historical, socioeconomic, and political context* subchapter highlights the main elements and challenges facing women's empowerment. A subchapter is designated to the analysis of the *women's role in the process of democracy making and the impact of democratisation on gender equality*. The governments' approach to the question of gender equality will also be examined in this context. Finally, the last part of Chapter 4 looks at the outcome of the pandemic on the evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia. The case study section serves as a solid base for analysis that is supplemented by the theoretical part of the research and is tested in the following chapter, the empirical corpus of the dissertation.

4.1. Morocco

4.1.1. General background on women's rights

Unlike Tunisia, the situation of women in Morocco demonstrated an inferior position due to the presence of traditional social practices. This was further consolidated in the family law of 1957, also called *Moudawana,* which entailed significant social and economic obstacles to the realisation of gender equality. Contrary to the Tunisian CSP, women could not be married without a matrimonial guardian, the legal age of marriage was only 15 years, women could not be employed without the consent of their male guardians, and unilateral divorce was possible (Charrad, 2012, p. 7.). However, the growing activities of various women's rights NGOs (from which the *Association Démocratique des Femmes, ADFM,* and the *Union de l'Action Feminine, UAF* emerge) from the 1970s and their significant influence on decision makers distinguish Morocco from Tunisia and even Algeria. As Ennaji emphasised, women in Morocco played an important role in the democratisation and modernisation process by stepping up against

the approach of decision makers to the question of gender equality and challenging state-centric governance. The NGOs activities over the last decade extended to other fields and include the fight against violence, child abuse, and sustainable development (Ennaji, 2016b, pp. 3-4.).

Regarding the role of political management in the evolution of women's rights, it is crucial to emphasise that in Morocco, the King has supreme power in decision making, including the country's approach to gender equality. The relationship to the opposition and the question of power-sharing all depend on the attitude of the monarch. The centralisation of power and the top-down approach to gender equality remained strong despite the reforms carried out after the Arab Spring (Mhajne, 2020, p. 192.).

Significant changes in the political field occurred in the 1990s, following the adoption of the new constitution. Pressures coming from the international arena regarding the field of human rights opened the way for women's rights organisations to step up and start demanding more privileges for women. From the point of view of international principles on gender equality, Morocco ratified the CEDAW in 1993 (Mhajne, 2020, p. 192.) and due to pressures from women's rights organisations lifted its reservations in 2011.[38] The ratification of the CEDAW must be understood in the context of the political division of the country, along the secular versus Islamist discourse in which these reservations were a form of concession towards the Islamists.

Based on the above trends, the question of gender equality in Morocco is shaped by the traditional division of the public versus private spheres with the dominance of men as heads of the families. This was also demonstrated by the fact that the adoption of laws that defend the position of women in the family and in the labour force lagged behind that of Tunisia. It only happened in 1995 that women could freely practice trade activity and the penal code was revised in 2003, following the succession of King Mohamed VI to the throne in 1999.

The period under Mohamed VI also meant a favourable environment for the proliferation of non-state actors through the assurance of foreign financial support to women's rights NGOs. Political prisoners, including Islamists, were also released, and a

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[38] Morocco's reservations to the CEDAW (article 9 and 16) included the article regarding the nationality of the children where the articles of CEDAW provided equal rights to women, same for women's equal rights in the family, which were considered incompatible with the Islamic law. United Nations (1979).

wider range of topics, such as sustainable development or human rights, could emerge. These measures were followed by the quota reform in 2002, which provided at least 10% of seats for women during the parliamentary elections and which was the result of national and international pressure. The 10% increased to 15% after the Arab Spring (Ennaji, 2020, pp. 166-167, 170.). However, this quota still does not meet the international requirement of the CEDAW that determined a 30% participation of women in national parliaments to take their opinion into account (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2003, p. 14.). In 2007, following the decision of the government, women were allowed to transfer their citizenship to their children. Another key point on improving women's conditions was the reform of conservative family law, a new *Moudawana* in 2004, which was the result of the political context (i.e. 2003 terrorist attack in Casablanca) and conformity to international standards for women's rights. However, these reforms could have not taken place without an active role of women's rights organisations. On the one hand, modifications to family law significantly improved the conditions of Moroccan women. On the other hand, the new *Moudawana* could not be considered as progressive as the Tunisian CSP was (e.g. polygamy was not abolished) (Ennaji, 2020, pp. 165-168.).

4.1.2. Women's rights in the post-Arab Spring era

The start of the Arab Spring confirmed the intersection of feminism and the struggle to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the country. While experts on feminist movements and women's rights in Morocco emphasised that the question of gender equality was absent from the 2011 movements (McKanders, 2014, pp. 166-167.), it is without doubt that women's rights movements played a key role in the events. Contrary to the Tunisian example, the Arab Spring in Morocco resulted in decentralisation, participation, and in rapid and in-depth reforms, including the referendum on the content of the constitution. Concerning the question of gender equality, as mentioned, women were granted a wider range of rights, manifested in the lifting of Morocco's reservations to the CEDAW in 2011 (articles 9 and 16). Although the provisions of the new constitution were not implemented from the point of achieving gender equality, article 19 of the basic law provided guarantees for Moroccan women in economic, political, social and civil rights (McKanders, 2014, p. 160.).

In addition to embracing the question of gender equality, the encouragement of the political participation of the young generation also figured among the government's wide-ranging reforms. Following the 2011 elections that brought about the victory of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (JDP) with the win of 107 parliamentary seats out of 395 (International Federation for Human Rights, FIDH, 2012, p. 71.), women's rights movements forced decision makers to include women under 40 years of age on the national list instead of uniquely restricting places for women under 40 years of age (Darhour, 2020, p. 288.). However, the percentage of women sitting in parliament in Morocco remained far beyond Tunisia after the parliamentary elections in 2011. While in Morocco 17% of seats were taken by women in the Lower House and the percentage of women in the Upper House reached 2.2%, in Tunisia this ratio was 26.7% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2003).

Despite the political will from the beginning of the 2000s, reinforced in the context of 2011 to change the gender composition of the Parliament, as Darhour emphasised, the reluctance of the political elite to involve women in the decision making process has remained one of the major obstacles to achieving gender equality. According to Darhour, the Moroccan example clearly shows that the quota reform does not serve women or young people, but contributes to further strengthening the unequal distribution of power, the dominance of masculine norms (Darhour, 2020, pp. 294-295, 297.). The marginalisation of Moroccan women in the political arena raises Cynthia Enloe's question of where women are in decision making (Code, 2000, p. 272.). The cultural and social characteristics, the remnants of a strongly patriarchal society, still determine actors present at the mezzo level of society, thus underpinning the consolidation of *gendered international relations* (Keohane, 1998, p. 193.).

From the point of the traditional gender attributions, i.e. *strength*, *power*, and *patriotism* versus *naivety*, *weakness*, and *emotions*, as a result of the post-Arab Spring period the elements of identity shaping were supplemented by those of the *secularist* and *Muslim feminist* discourse. In this sense, *freedom*, *dignity*, *social justice,* and *equality*, the slogans of the Arab Spring continued to shape the role of women in the political, economic, social, and cultural fields (Glas – Spierings, 2020, pp. 132-134.).

In addition to the social and economic impacts, the Arab Spring also opened the way for a discourse on various cultural and social topics, among which the reinforcement of the

Arabic-Berber (*also called Amazighe*) identity emerges with the recognition of Berber as the official language in 2011. As a result, the improvement in women's conditions points beyond the conventional framework where the improvement was strictly interwoven with the multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic characteristics of the country (Sadiqi, 2016, pp. 23-24.). The activities of the NGO *La Voix de la Femme Amazighe,* for women's rights, who was also involved in the conduct of interviews that will be detailed in the following chapter, are a good example. Thanks to the bottom-up initiatives (e.g., translation of different texts to Tamazight to enable Berber women know their basic rights), the organisation played a crucial role in the promotion of the cultural and social rights of the Berber population of the country. The representative of the NGO stated that women have a central position in the Amazighe society. Therefore, the women's rights NGO makes efforts to bring back those traditions that originate in Berber customs and that guarantee women that they have a share of the salary of their husband even if they only deal with household activities.

4.1.3. Historical, socioeconomic, and political context

Although similarities can be noted, the evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia depends on ethnic characteristics, as well as the political management and the degree of integration of *sharia* into the legal systems of the countries analysed. In Morocco the succession of King Mohamed VI to the throne brought about changes in the political management of the country; as has been mentioned, a period of openness started in Moroccan politics.

Similarly, to the case of Tunisia, women's rights in Morocco are also understood along the secular versus religious dichotomy with the rise of Islamists from the 1970s, that replaced the conservative-modernist discourse with a secularist-Islamist one. In Morocco, differences among conservatives and Islamists lie in the fact that the latter insist on the strict interpretation of the Quran, while the former tends to support secularists. The modernist approach was dominant during the decolonisation and in the state-building process, which, similarly to the Tunisian efforts, served to set the country on the Western model of development. It was in this context that conservatives were required to co-habit with promoters of modernisation. As Sadiqi emphasised, in addition to the secularist-Islamist discourse, the society is divided by the multi-ethnic and

multilinguistic differences, i.e. the emergence of the Berber identity that reappeared more significantly after the Arab Spring (Sadiqi, 2016, pp. 17-20.).

Despite the coexistence of secular and religious traditions, the presence and role of Moroccan Islamists differ from Islamists in Tunisia. While members of Ennahda faced harsh repression from the 1990s and several representatives of the party were forced into exile, including female members, PJD (*Parti de la Justice et du Développement; Development and Justice Party*) in Morocco was gradually integrated into the policy making of the country. This also meant that women could be present in the party from the beginning of its establishment. While the presence of the women in the Islamist movement would suppose their more active and overall role in the political organisation, in fact women's tasks are restricted to the promotion of awareness campaigns and other social activities such as providing social assistance to those in need. As a consequence, decision-making and other activities of high responsibility remain with men, while 20% of women are included in decision-making processes. The low presence (10%) of women during meetings of the regional office of PJD, is also a good example of the traditional division of masculine and feminine roles. This is worsened by the existence of traditional social patterns, e.g. family obligations, and socioeconomic limits in the southern parts of Morocco that serve as constraints to women's empowerment (Munteanu, 2020, pp. 6-8.). In general, as Munteanu explained, Moroccan and Tunisian women successfully contributed to the establishment of Islamist movements. Their social role was also of crucial importance to the creation of female associations, the visibility of women and their propagation of Islamic values. However, resulting from the political circumstances related to the operation of Islamist parties in Morocco and Tunisia, unlike members of Ennahda, activists of PJD were not forced into exile (Munteanu, 2020, pp. 12-13). Therefore, the party operates on a more homogeneous platform that also means in the case of Morocco a widespread debate on controversial topics, e.g. equality in inheritance did not come into being.

Based on the aforementioned findings no significant differences can be remarked between the approach of PJD and other secular parties regarding the question of gender equality. In fact, Morocco's lifting of its reservations to CEDAW right after the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the increase of the percentage of women in the parliament all happened under the ruling of the PJD party. Though, without doubt women's rights NGOs also exerted significant pressure on Islamists and limited their

room to manoeuver, mainly in Tunisia. The challenges women experience in decision-making and access to key positions in the PJD party is a general tendency originated in those social and cultural limits that were discussed in detail during the theoretical corpus and were confirmed during the conduction of interviews in the empirical part of the research.

The *Moudawana* is regarded as a key area when examining the process of achieving gender equality. The 2004 reform did not succeed in eliminating all forms of traditional practice that serve as limitations on women's empowerment. However, significant changes in the extension of women's rights to divorce (mutual consent and irreconcilable differences included), institutional obstacles in front of polygamy, and matters concerning the status of children (nationality, priority for women in custody rights) are positive steps in the struggle of women to achieve equality between men and women (Charrad, 2012). The political circumstances regarding the reform of family law are also clear proof of dialogue between secularists and Islamists with the supremacy of the monarch to manoeuver between the two political wings and to boost the image of the country abroad. As Charrad also reinforced, further obstacles to achieving gender equality remain major challenges to face in the future, among these figures, women's high rate of illiteracy that reached 60% (Charrad, 2012, pp. 7-9). These findings were also proved by Moroccan interviewees, most of whom identified educational and socioeconomic constraints in the first place, whereas representatives of NGOs in Tunisia mentioned inequalities in the labour force as the biggest obstacles.

With reference to the main slogans of the Arab Spring it is important to shed light on the socioeconomic context in which women stepped up to demand greater political and social rights for Moroccan women. Despite the major initiatives deriving from the bottom-up approach following the independence of Morocco, McKanders highlighted the immense gender inequalities in the educational sector and the labour market. These inequalities were most visible in rural regions where 22% of women did not receive any education at the dawn of the Arab Spring and 8 out of 10 women could not read (McKanders, 2014, p. 158.).

Socioeconomic inequalities were further aggravated by the outbreak of the pandemic and had a serious impact on the job and educational advancement of young girls and women (the results will be detailed in Chapter 4.3.). The unequal division of the female

and masculine labour force before the COVID-19 pandemic was demonstrated by the fact that of the 12.2 million workers, only 22.1% were women compared to the 70.5% ratio for men. In addition to this, socioeconomic differences between men and women are the result of the decades-long government policy that focused on the development of urban areas, therefore did not address the needs of the society (Ennaji, 2021, pp. 6-7.). In this context, the failure of the Islamist JDP after two consecutive legislative elections and the victory of the National Rally of Independents (RNI) during the parliamentary, regional, and municipal elections held in September 2021 with the appointment of the businessman Aziz Akhannouch as head of government will also have a crucial impact on women's advancement. Political realignment is part of the large-scale plan of the government to reduce the social gap and double economic output per capita by 2035 in a country where in 2020 the GDP already decreased by 7.1% and the poverty rate reached 11.7% according to official statistical data (The Guardian, 2021).

4.2. Tunisia

4.2.1. General background on women's rights

In Tunisia, as has been mentioned before, the centralisation of power brought about a strong political leadership, with President Bourguiba taking this role in 1957. Due to poor indicators of human development (Tessler – Keppel, 1976, p. 73.),[39] Bourguiba realised that a modernisation process was inevitable to set the country on the path to development. The Bourguibist state building program mentioned in the second chapter under the concept of nation-state building process and state feminism meant the adoption of a Western model of development, therefore, a reduced role of women's rights movements (Sadiqi, 2008, p. 458.).

From the point of the social movement theory of Oberschall (1997) women's rights activists have been present since the struggle of nationalist movements for independence, but the state-building process in which everything was subordinated to the national development overwrote the conventional way of the evolution of feminism. Therefore, in Tunisia the empowerment of women reflected a bidirectional process and

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[39] In 1956 the literacy rate only reached 15% and only one child in thirty received a high-school education.

the interactions on the level of the political leadership and the sub state actors resulted in a reverse situation with the state being the key player in the formation of the social movement. Badran (2009) and Moghissi (Moghissi, 1999, p. 35.) also found that the secular flow of the evolution of women's rights in Tunisia must be understood in the context of nation-state building, this issue was also examined in the framework of secular versus religious discourse on women's rights in the second chapter.

The pre-Bourguiba era was dominated by a bottom-up approach, while the 1960s were characterised by a reverse process in which attention was paid to the development of the Tunisian economy. Regarding the outstanding role of economic development, everything, including female participation in the labour market, was subordinated to the political direction of Habib Bourguiba according to whom female participation was compatible with traditional feminine roles (Debuysere, 2018, p. 4.).[40] In her work entitled *'La Femme' Before and After the Tunisian Uprising: (Dis)continuities in the Configuration of Women in the Truth Regime of 'Tunisianité',* Debuysere drew a parallel between Tunisian feminism and the identity building process of previous regimes of Tunisia. On the one hand, the artificially created concept of '*Tunisianité*' fits in the context of educated middle-class women. However, '*Tunisianité*' did not reflect Tunisian realities. From the point of view of the feminist IR theory *modernisation*, *economic development*, *elimination of illiteracy*, and *political participation* were attributed to women's empowerment which overwrote the traditional division of public and private spheres.

The most significant measure of Bourguiba was the adoption of the *Personal Status Code* (CSP) in 1956 that abolished polygamy, provided women with the right to divorce and child custody, and set a minimum age for marriage (Rébublique Tunisienne, 2012). In 1958 Bourguiba introduced compulsory education for young women and people living in rural areas (Chabchoub, 2014, p. 128.). However, despite the visibly progressive measures, the CSP did not succeed in eliminating gender inequalities in the family as women continued to inherit half of men's inheritance, men received greater rights to the guardianship of children, and women were required to obey their husbands (Charrad, 2012, p. 5.).

Taking into account Debuysere's point of view, it is essential to mention that female participation in the labour market can be compatible with the traditional roles of women, because real feminism can create a balance between equality and the traditional roles of women.

Bourguiba's successor, President Ben Ali, continued to promote the image of modern Tunisia since his coming to power in 1987 (Ennaji, 2020, p. 164.), i.e. the pursuit of state-controlled feminism under which only those women's NGOs could operate that enjoyed government approval. The two most dominant women's rights organisations that also challenged the government were the *Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne* (*National Union of Tunisian Women*, UNFT)[41] founded in 1956 and the *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Democrates* (*Tunisian Association of Democratic Women*, ATFD).[42] In addition to the restrictions in freedom of expression, the economic marginalisation of women was also significant during Ben Ali, since women only gained three-quarters of the salary of men, though with a prospect of full retirement (Arfaoui, 2016, p. 227.). It was in this context the feminist discourse intensified in the 1980s and 1990s, which is also considered the second wave of feminism in Tunisia. As a result of the activism of women's rights NGOs, Tunisian women married to foreign nationals could pass their citizenship on to their children for the first time in the country's history (Charrad, 2012, pp. 5-6.) and in 2002 the citizenship law was amended (Ennaji, 2020, p. 164.). This privilege provided to women was a crucially important step in achieving the equal status of men and women in the family. Regarding the field of human rights and the elimination of discrimination, it must be underlined that the dichotomy of the treatment of women's rights is also well demonstrated by the fact that Tunisia ratified the CEDAW in 1985, but with some reservations[43] that were lifted in 2014.

As a result of the repressive measures of President Bourguiba and Ben Ali on the freedom of association and of expression, the post-Arab Spring era opened the way for the two organisations mentioned above and for new ones to freely embrace previously marginalised topics, including the launch of a widespread discourse on equal inheritance.

As has already been mentioned in the nation-state building process of the second chapter, women's rights activism in North Africa is deeply rooted in the anticolonial struggle of people starting in the 1920s and 1930s and was subordinated to the political

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[41] See the official website of the Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne [n.d.].
[42] Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l'Homme [n.d.]: *Association Tunisienne des Femmes Democrates [ATFD, Tunisian Association of Democratic Women]* [n.d.]
[43] Tunisia's reservations to the CEDAW included inequality between men and women with respect to their children, inequality in marriage and its dissolution, guardianship. (United Nations, 1979).

context, as well as to the relationship of secular and conservative forces with each other. The socioeconomic framework following the independence of Morocco and Tunisia was shaped to improve the conditions of women. Therefore, the initial bottom-up approach established a rather favourable environment for non-state actors to operate.

In connection with women's rights movements in the Post-Arab Spring period, Ennaji also reinforced that a willingness had already existed from non-state actors long before the Arab Spring to improve the social position of women in the region. Therefore, in the long run the success of democratisation depends on the political intention of the governments, that is, the implementation of the constitutional framework of women's rights (Ennaji, 2016a, p. 98, 100.). Irrespective of the analysed country, it is important to highlight that two Moroccan NGOs (*High Atlas Foundation* and *La Voix de la Femme Amazighe*), with whom the interviews conducted will be evaluated in detail in Chapter 5 confirmed that the absence of the implementation of the legal framework was considered one of the biggest constraints to achieving gender equality.

Referring to the social movement theory of Oberschall (1997) when placing women's rights organisations in the general historical, socioeconomic and political context of the country the subchapter concludes that even though Tunisia disposes of all those elements that constitute a convenient environment[44] for the proliferation of civil societies, women's movements were deeply affected by the political leadership of the country. Therefore, changes following the Arab Spring and the proliferation of the civil society must be examined in the specific political context of the previous leaderships.

4.2.2. Women's rights in the post-Arab Spring era

On the one hand, the ousting of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was seen as a promising new era for women, too, who actively participated in the events of the Arab Spring starting from December 2010. The Arab Spring also led to an increase in activism among women's rights organisations with a long historical background (e.g. ATFD or AFTURD) and the creation of new NGOs. The struggle of women for extensive rights is also understood in the legacy of Tunisia's state feminism and the preservation of previously achieved privileges. However, on the other hand, the

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[44] According to Oberschall heterogeneous society, educated youth capable of triggering change and the absence of the intervention of the military in state affairs all make up a convenient environment for the proliferation of the civil society (Oberschall, 1997, pp. 291-292).

achievements of the Arab Spring were shadowed by the rise of Islamists from October 2011, whose approach to gender equality and their initial concessions were soon questioned.

From the point of view of the promotion of gender equality, the Arab Spring caused a widespread debate on gender roles during the drafting of Tunisia's new constitution between 2011 and 2014, which was the result of greater rights to freedom of expression. The constitution voted in February 2014 was the manifestation of a long but promising struggle that eliminated any reference to sharia and thus ensured equal rights for both sexes based on Western type of constitutional guarantees (Hamza, 2016, pp. 214-215, 217.).

In addition to the promulgation of the progressive constitution, the outstanding percentage of female candidates and registered voters (51% vs. 45% compared to the legislative elections of October 2011) during the 2014 elections was clear proof that the Arab Spring fostered the participation of women in the political field. This was further enhanced by the submission of the presidential candidacy of two women, Emna Mansour al-Karoui and Kalthoum Kennou (Hamza, 2016, pp. 218-219.), a historical step in the effort to achieve gender equality.

Women's rights organisations also played a key role in promoting female candidates to the legislative and municipal elections due to the formulation of the electoral law and active campaigns. One of the representatives of the *Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes* also reinforced this fact, the interviewee said that Kalthoum Kennou enjoyed the support of the organisation during the 2014 elections. In connection with women's candidacy for high political positions, it only happened on 30 September 2020 that a woman, Najla Bouden was nominated as the first female prime minister of Tunisia and the Arab world (Mazoue, 2021). Although some activists see the nomination as a strategic decision to shed light on the importance of feminist issues rather than real intentions, the government's decision is without doubt a significant change compared to previous periods.

From the point of view of the bottom-up initiative on improving women's conditions, 2017 is considered a milestone. Law 58 adopted in 2017 eliminated violence committed against women in all fields of life, including the labour market, the political sphere and domestic violence (Zaki, 2019, p. 2.). The adoption of Law 58 is the result of constant

pressure from women's rights NGOs on the government, which also achieved praised from the representatives of the AFTURD and the *Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes*. The previous activist gave a positive assessment of the achievements of women's rights organisations in the political field. According to her, the adoption of Law 58 ensures the implementation of real measures against violators as happened in the case of an MP who was arrested for sexual violence. In the long run, the implementation of the law against gender violence is of crucial importance and is highly appreciated in light of the increased violence committed against women after the outbreak of the pandemic.

Another key measure under President Essebsi was the radical amendment to the CSP in September 2017 that allowed Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men. This measure considered exceptional in the Arab world was further enhanced by President Essebsi's urge to introduce reforms to the inheritance law (Zaki, 2019, p. 2.), a quite divisive but progressive topic that has been on the agenda since Essebsi's coming to power in 2014. Although for now the inheritance law is removed from the political agenda, the political will during the presidency of Essebsi and the pressure coming from non-state actors are excellent proof that a cooperation between the mezzo and micro levels can be viable.

Taking into account its public and political reactions, it is important to involve the post-Arab Spring's discourse on equal inheritance in the research, mainly because of its relevance from the point of view of the secular versus religious dialogue, although the question of equal inheritance divided even seculars. As Charrad has already mentioned, the CSP did not bring total equality for women. Due to the presence of religious law, women inherited half of the inheritance of men (Charrad, 2012, p. 5.).

Regarding the public opinion about the law on equal inheritance, the cultural and social diversities cannot be neglected. While in rural areas the tribal community settles the question of inheritance according to the rules of the community, in the capital and in the densely populated coastal region, the dominance of the bourgeoisie with the adoption of Western values is significant. The third group consists of the traditional religious community in the case of which the question of inheritance is regulated by sharia. The divisive nature of the topic of equal inheritance is well demonstrated by the Islamists' general view on gender equality. As one of the female members of the Ennahda party explained, ensuring equality in labour force, in salaries and advancement for women has nothing to do with providing equality in inheritance (Munteanu, 2020, pp. 11-12.). In

2016 a committee consisting of nine jurists, civil rights activists, and university professors was set up to examine the reforms of Tunisian laws, including the law on equal inheritance in order to conform to the international norms. However, religious experts were not involved in this process, which later caused a contest among conservative forces (Hanafi – Tomeh, 2019, pp. 210-211.).

The main arguments for the adoption of the law on equal inheritance included the implementation of international conventions (i.e., CEDAW), the interpretation of the constitution, the task of the committee that was set up in 2016, the pressure coming from non-state actors and the realisation of equality between men and women. Arguments for equal inheritance were related to the nature of the Tunisian state (civil state). In this sense, the constitution adopted in 2014 did not contain any reference to Islamic law. This meant that the question of inheritance should be settled according to the constitutional guarantees of gender equality. As Hanafi and Tomeh highlighted, the main concerns of the widespread debate were of jurisprudential, sociological, and legal origin, where the main question was how to reconcile traditional practices with Western values and internationally settled principles (Hanafi – Tomeh, 2019, pp. 217-218, 225.).

Arguments, counterarguments, the international framework of women's rights, and the pressure of women's rights NGOs on decision makers were taken into account when analysing the question of equal inheritance. In addition to these facts, the topic is strictly interwoven with the evolution of the historical, cultural, or social background of the country.

Another important point to keep in the general overview of women's rights in Tunisia is that we can draw a parallel between the aforementioned findings and the feminist IR theory. Invoking Tickner's findings on the so-called *gendered society*, the inferior position of women in the public space is the result of the consolidation of traditional feminine and masculine norms in the private space. Although in Tunisia superficial measures were taken in the political, economic and educational fields and women's rights organisations were present, – although ostensibly, – which all served to improve women's conditions, masculine norms in private life remained dominant.

Morocco's and Tunisia's reservations to the CEDAW and the question of inheritance are clear proof that family law remains a field that is still regulated by Islamic law. In this regard, decision makers find themselves caught between two stools, which is true

especially after the Arab Spring. On the one hand, the demands of the international community are seen as directives to which the government must conform substantially. On the other hand, decision makers are obliged to manoeuver in a conservative society on which Western-type norms were built.

4.2.3. Historical, socioeconomic, and political context

The analysis of the question of women's empowerment cannot be separated from the religious context. It is important to understand that Tunisian feminism is part of a tolerant identity that calls for the rejection of extremism and advocates the non-violent interpretation of Islam (Debuysere, 2016, p. 203.). This concept is clearly demonstrated in the policy of the Ennahda as the party differs from other Islamic movements, i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood in its characteristics. As Yildirim highlighted when analysing the transformation of Ennahda from a movement to a political party, the Tunisian formation regarded social, economic or political issues highly important to resolve. While maintaining its religious identity as the dissertation will explain later, the movement refused to embrace Salafi ideas (Yildirim, 2017, pp. 211-213.). In fact, the party's approach to the question of the support of extreme Salafist ideologies brought about its failure during the fragile political situation that followed the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Moreover, it also pushed the party to rethink the preaching of traditional values as a central factor of the ideology of the party.

From the point of the analysis of the feminist discourse in Tunisia the ideology of Ennahda is similar to what Moghadam called Islamic feminism (2003), a more progressive approach to the question of gender equality that is open to the adoption of flexible methods besides preserving traditional religious roles. The accentuation of traditional values is quite understandable and is seen as a counteractive and a revivalist movement in light of the memories of the colonial period and the enforcement of Western values following the independence of the country.

Related to the aforementioned debate about evaluating gender equality on a secular versus religious basis, examining how Islamist parties, mainly Ennahda in Tunisia and PJD in Morocco, addressed gender issues during the Arab Spring is of crucial importance. The PJD's views on handling gender equality have already been discussed in the Moroccan case study. Despite Western stereotypes about the position of women

in Islam and the restriction on women to do household activities (private sphere), women were apparent in Ennahda from the beginning of its foundation, but without any doubt, the Arab Spring brought a real breakthrough, a greater recognition for women to act.

From the point of the mobilisation of other women, one of the positive outcomes of the coming to power of Ennahda was that the party offered a platform for those marginalised women who were neglected during the repressive measures of the previous regimes. However, this positive evaluation must be regarded with caution as a significant fragmentation did exist between the moderate and radical branches of the political party (Brechenmacher – Hubbard, 2020, p. 1.). Another important viewpoint in the evolution of Ennahda's approach to gender issues after the Arab Spring is the great influence women's rights NGOs exerted on the stance of the party. With no doubt this impact contributed to the elaboration of a progressive constitution that took into consideration the interests of all individuals of society. However, the previous accomplishments are still far from the realisation of gender equality in all fields of life.

Contrary to the aforementioned quite positive evaluation of Munteanu about the access of women to the Islamist parties, Brechenmacher and Hubbard described political life as strongly dominated by men, thus women stay underrepresented in key posts and in the political office of the party. As an example, in 2019 out of 27 women only 6 were part of the political office of Ennahda. The analysis of Brechenmacher and Hubbard further highlighted the constraints women face during parliamentary elections as a result of unequal access to the top of electoral lists (Brechenmacher – Hubbard, 2020, pp. 7-8.). Nevertheless, the presence of patriarchal norms cannot be attributed exclusively to the rather conservative view of Ennahda and the fragmentation inside the party. Explained by the main findings of the theoretical part of the dissertation the masculinisation of international relations are well reflected in the processes taking place on the domestic level; the public versus private division of masculine and feminine roles also penetrate institutions.

As has partly been mentioned, the modern history of the Tunisian Republic starting from Habib Bourguiba is understood along the religious versus secular fault line. This fact was also reinforced by Willis, who stated that in Tunisia the political struggle

stemmed from the personal fight of the secular Habib Bourguiba and the conservative Salah Ben Youssef (Willis, 2014, pp. 38-39.).

For both Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the emergence of Islamists from the 1970s was seen as one of the biggest threats to their power. The Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 had a great impact on *Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* (The Islamic Group) founded by Rachid al-Ghannouchi in 1972, so in 1981 *Al Jamaa al-Islamiyya* became a *haraka* (movement), i.e. Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami (Islamic Tendency Movement, ITM*)* (Allani, 2007 p. 68.). In order for ITM to take the shape of a political party, it removed from its name any reference to Islam, and in 1989 ITM became Ennahda (meaning Renaissance) movement (Malka, 2015: 97). It is of crucial importance to emphasise that in its founding years Ennahda advocated the traditional roles of women in Islam and opposed the adoption of Western-type feminism of President Bourguiba, mainly regarding education and the question of polygamy. However, for political reasons, the political movement demonstrated some kind of shift following the ousting of Ben Ali in January 2011 that resulted in women representatives of Ennahda gaining 42 places of the 49 in the National Constituent Assembly during the first democratic elections held in 2011 (Radan, 2018, p. 8.).

While in her work entitled *Between feminism and unionism: the struggle for socioeconomic dignity of working-class women in pre-and post-uprising Tunisia* Debuysere applied an economic approach, Arfaoui focused on the social and cultural inequalities which resulted in the creation of a rigid society with limited rights for women. The high rate of illiteracy in the 1920s (nine-tenths) also confirms the marginal position of women in the pre-Bourguiba period. For Arfaoui, the establishment of women's organisations was rather seen as a social initiative embedded in an anticolonial context to improve the social position of women, that is, in the field of education. On the one hand, the French colonial period prompted awareness among women. However, according to Arfaoui, the inflow of new ideologies from Europe and the European experience of those Tunisian women who had the opportunity to travel to France were important factors in triggering change among women (Arfaoui, 2007, pp. 53-55.). While the Tunisian case study starts with the rule of Bourguiba and describes Tunisian feminism as a state-controlled, top-down process, the findings of Arfaoui prove that the roots of Tunisian feminism have long been present in Tunisian society.

In addition to the religious and socioeconomic context, the main goals of women's rights activists, including civil society organisations, can also be understood in a historical context. Mann and Huffman applied the term '*wave*' to describe the movements that had a significant impact on the transformation of the society. According to Arfaoui's work entitled *The Development of the Feminist Movement in Tunisia 1920s–2000s*, Tunisian feminism is divided into three waves. The first indicates the birth of the feminist movement in Tunisia (between the 1920s and 1956), the second is the period of state feminism (between 1956 and the 1970s) and the third wave refers to the emergence of an autonomous feminist movement in the late 1970s (Arfaoui, 2007, p. 53.). Contrary to the traditional division of feminist movements, Tunisian feminism must be placed in the context of the colonial past of the North African country and its struggle for independence. Capitalism introduced by the French colonial power resulted in women being invisible in the labour market, therefore Tunisian women started to organise themselves against the colonial power. In this context, the period before Bourguiba period was seen as the establishment of the first associations and women's unions (Debuysere, 2018, p. 4.).

The second wave of Tunisian feminism followed the fight of women to eradicate economic inequality. However, despite the economic growth, achieved as a consequence of the economic planning of President Bourguiba between 1969 and 1979, political repression contributed to further strengthening of the existing socioeconomic inequalities (Debuysere, 2018, pp. 5-6.).

The third wave of feminism in Tunisia aimed at establishing an autonomous representation for Tunisian women to counter the strict control on civil societies. In this regard, the fact that the *Tunisian Association of Democratic Women* (ATDF) and the *Association of Tunisian Women for Research on Development* (AFTURD) could legally operate must be highlighted. ATDF differs from other women's rights organisations in terms of its pluralistic and independent goals to address the deficiencies that remained from previous governments. However, the activities of women's rights NGOs before the Arab Spring were strictly dependent on the main direction of the Tunisian political arena. The adaptation to the political context also required a change from ATDF in the 1990s and 2000s. Therefore, the *Tunisian Association of Democratic Women* focused on two fronts: challenging state feminism and the threat of Tunisian Islamists, as well as the rise of conservative forces. The latter also stepped up with the aim of confronting

the achievements of the previous regimes to ensure the privileged position for Tunisian women (Ghanmi, 1993 and Debuysere, 2018, pp. 7-9.).

As general background of women's rights and the analysis of the historical, socioeconomic, political and religious context of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia, it was important to provide a systematic overview in a matrix. The figure compares those relevant aspects that help us understand the given country's political approach to the handling of the question of gender equality and the room sub state actors had to manoeuver.

ASPECTS OF THE ANYALYSIS	TUNISIA	MOROCCO
Approach to the question of gender equality	TOP-DOWN approach (*state-feminism*)	BOTTOM-UP approach from the 1990's (favourable political environment for women's rights NGOs), but also an institutional supremacy of the monarchy in the political sphere that to some extent can be regarded as a constraint to realising gender equality
Political arena	Centralisation of power (state-building process based on the Western model of development)	Supremacy of the monarchy → centralisation
Women's participation in the labour market	Fault-line between the northern vs. southern regions (rural areas: participation in the labour market was only 20%, unemployment rate was 40%)	From 2017 gender gap is rising in the labour market (unemployment rate of men: 8.8% vs. unemployment rate of women: 14.7%).
Women's participation in decision-making (according to IPU'S ranking as of 1 December, 2021)	The percentage of women sitting in the national parliament: 26.3%	Women occupy only 22.8% of the lower house and 12.5% of the upper chamber
Legal background	1956: Personal Status Code (CSP)→ considered to be the most progressive family law in the Arab world; 1985: ratification of CEDAW (2014: lifting its reservations); 2002: amendment of the citizenship law	1957: family law (subordinated position of women) → 2004: new family law (*mudawana*) was enacted as a result of women's rights NGOs pressure; 1993: ratification of the CEDAW (2011: lifting its reservations); 1995: women could practice trade activity; 2003: revision of the work and penal code; 2007: transfer of the citizenship of the mother to the children

Table 3: The evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia
Source: Compiled by the author based on Ennaji, 2020 [n.d.]

4.3. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women's Rights in Morocco and Tunisia

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about new political and economic challenges that all governments had to face. This new situation required decision makers to adapt to new strategies and reconsider the question of gender equality. In addition to this, women also tend to suffer from the psychological effects of the pandemic, as they are more vulnerable to domestic violence resulting from accumulated social and economic frustration.

According to the OECD report in 2020 that analyses the effects of COVID-19 on gender inequalities in MENA, the enrolment of women in school constituted one of the main challenges even before the pandemic, but the crisis caused a higher number of women dropping out of the educational system. School dropout was much higher in remote rural areas with limited access to the internet and other materials necessary for distance teaching (OCDE, 2020, pp. 4-5.). The second most serious effect of the pandemic includes issues related to the labour market and concerns about women involved in agricultural activities, exacerbating the inequalities women experienced before COVID-19. In Morocco, 61.8% of the female labour force works in the agricultural sector compared to only 43.4% of men according to the latest available statistical data from the International Labour Organization (ILO).[45] While in Tunisia 70% of women are engaged in agricultural activities, when it comes to compensation, their salaries are only half of what men earn. In addition to inequalities in the labour market, rural women account for 65% of school dropouts and an illiteracy rate of approximately 30% (Bajec, 2020), which are disturbing trends considering the objectives of the International Bill of Women's Rights (CEDAW) to improve rural women's living conditions (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2003, pp. 15, 18-19.).

The most serious impact of the pandemic on women was the increase in domestic violence. COVID-19 upheld the traditional role of men as the head of the family, which resulted in an increased feeling of frustration. In Morocco, according to a study conducted between March and July, 57% of Moroccan women experienced some form of violence during this research period (Ennaji, 2021, p. 11.). A significant increase in violence was also identified among Tunisian women following the outbreak of the

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[45] See International Labour Organization [n.d.].

COVID-19 pandemic. Between March and May 2020, the number of registered cases was 9 times higher than average (2,700 cases were violent out of 9,800), and 76% of Tunisian women experienced physical violence. Furthermore, violence also affected the labour market in the form of deprivation of access to job opportunities, as well as control of salaries. Despite the establishment of an emergency line in Tunisia for victims of violence, restrictions caused by the pandemic resulted in a decrease in complaints registered by the Ministry of Justice (UN Women, 2020, p. 6.).

Addressing the challenges women faced required different approaches from decision makers and NGOs, resulting in large-scale mobilisation. In Tunisia, in addition to the 24/7 emergency line, the Ministry of Women, Family, Children, and Seniors set up a reception centre to assist asylum seekers during quarantine before moving to traditional reception centres. Moreover, in collaboration with different ministries, women's rights organisations launched several awareness campaigns for women victims of domestic violence (OCDE, 2020, pp. 20-21.). However, the lack of information on the real number of victims remained unknown and, except for urgent cases, the activities of courts were suspended. The responses of women's rights organisations and governments to the challenges women have faced during COVID-19 clearly demonstrate that while the current global crisis can contribute to reconsidering gender inequalities through the mobilisation of NGOs, the lack of infrastructure poses an obstacle to the achievement of these objectives.

4.4. The evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia: the post-Arab Spring and the period of the pandemic compared

It is without doubt that the post-Arab Spring period and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic are considered a watershed in the evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia. Regarding actors at the mezzo level, both events urged the implementation of immediate measures, thus challenged the capacity of decision-makers. As for actors at the micro level, the post-Arab Spring and the pandemic period put sub state actors in an unexpected and unknown situation. Recalling the gist of the formation of social movements, common goals mobilised a large mass of people to find answers to their grievances and previously marginalised questions (DeFronzo – Gill, 2020, p. 27.). As has been mentioned in the brief historical outlook of Tunisia and Morocco, and during

the discussions of the main social indicators of both countries, with a special focus on women's empowerment (*state feminism*) the modernisation process of President Bourguiba exploited a strong intellectual class capable of triggering changes[46]. Contrary to Tunisia, in Morocco *state feminism* or *institutionalised feminism* did not happen, therefore reforms related to the promotion of gender equality could only take place several decades later and such measures required greater efforts and pressures from sub state actors[47]. The repression of the civil society in the analysed countries before the outbreak of the Arab Spring strictly limited the scope of women's rights organisations to act as only NGOs approved by the government could operate, with strict control (Bellin, 1995, pp. 124-126.).

When examining the similarities of the post-Arab Spring period and the pandemic situation it can be concluded that the post-Arab Spring era established a quite favourable era for women's rights NGOs to cooperate on which these organisations could build on during the pandemic. It is no surprise at all that both events necessitated an active role of women's rights NGOs. Similarly, to the achievement of major milestones in women's rights during the post-Arab Spring period (e.g. adoption of the new constitutions, increase of women's participation in the national parliament, lifting of the reservations related to CEDAW, discussions about the law on equal inheritance in Tunisia)[48], it was supposed that the pandemic would also bring about tangible results for women. However, the COVID-19 pandemic clearly revealed the deficiencies in the field of gender equality. While maintaining the image of a modern Western-type state in Tunisia with the protection of women's rights, the pandemic proved the limits of the legal framework. Most of the victims of domestic violence did not have the right tools or possibilities to submit a complaint, either because of poor infrastructural facilities, and restrictions related to the pandemic, or because of social constraints and the lack of knowledge about their rights. These problems were also underlined by some interviewees during the qualitative data collection. The transplantation of the legal framework in practice would require strong determination from decision-makers and a well-functioning, transparent government with institutions that monitor the implementation of these measures. Contrary to the situation of women's rights during the post-Arab Spring period, the second most important consequence was that the

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[46] See page 10 of the Introduction.
[47] See the comparison in Table 3: The evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia.
[48] See subchapter 4.2.2. Women's rights in the post-Arab Spring era (part of chapter 4.2. Tunisia)

pandemic revealed and deepened inequalities between men and women in the labour market[49]. According to previously mentioned data, women only occupy 20-23% of the labour market while in most vulnerable sectors, such as the agricultural sector, women are overrepresented with more than 60% of the workforce. Moreover, compared with the post-Arab Spring period, the mobilisation of women's rights activists were further aggravated by the restrictions and financial cuts related to the pandemic. As one of the representatives of women's rights NGOs explained during the interviews, the COVID-19 pandemic did not contribute to shedding light and finding a solution to gender inequalities. In fact, the pandemic deepened the already fragile socioeconomic conditions and their solution threw the question of gender equality into the shade.

4.5. Women and democracy building

This subchapter of the dissertation extends most of the previous literature that applied a fairly narrow, elitist understanding of democracy, such as Huntington, who associated democratic values with the Western Christian cultural space as well as with economic development (Huntington, 1991, pp. 12-34.). In this regard, Georgina Waylen will be highlighted (Waylen, 1994, p. 327-354.), who emphasised the complexity of women's political participation and underlined that political institutions, social and economic conditions, and the main objectives of the leadership must be examined simultaneously. On one hand, based on the theory of complex interdependence the question is *to what extent sub state actors can influence states' behaviour* which is also related to the hypothesis set up in Chapter one. On the other hand, discussions are centred around the *impact of a more gender-friendly environment in the development of other fields, namely on democracy building*, through the theory of comparative politics of gender (CPG) elaborated by Waylen. Deriving from the relationship and impact between the macro and mezzo level of analysis the priorities of the European Union and their possible impact on how women's empowerment is viewed in Morocco and Tunisia must also be mentioned.

The relationship between women and democracy is examined through the ratings of Freedom House between 2010 and 2022, based on different criteria of political rights

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[49] See page 92 of chapter 4.3. The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women's Rights in Morocco and Tunisia.

and civil liberties and to be compared on an annual basis in Tunisia and Morocco[50] when defining the democratic transition in the analysed countries. The main indicators are summarised later in Tables 4 and 5. The conduct of interviews with twenty representatives/ activists of Tunisian and Moroccan NGOs, explained in detail in Chapter 5, contributes to strengthening the main statement, namely that the mobilisation of women's rights NGOs can play an important role in overwriting the traditional division between public and private spheres (masculine vs. feminine roles). However, considering the complexity of the research topic, the impact socioeconomic circumstances have on the evolution of women's rights and the transition to democracy cannot be neglected either.

Related to the analysis of the correlation between transition to democracy from the 1990s and women's role in this process, Waylen found that in most of the cases women played a significant role in the establishment of a democratic political system. However, in the long-run their impact on decision-makers did not always seem durable as both internal (e.g. gendered political institutions) and external factors, circumstances (pressure from actors in the international arena) must also be taken into consideration. Referring to the theory of comparative politics of gender elaborated by Waylen it cannot be regarded that gender rights vary according to the differences in the approach of decision-makers to this question. While women's rights organisations can contribute to shaping a more democratic political system following the breakdown of authoritarian regimes, their role is rather additional as the evolution of gender equality is significantly dependent on the legacy of political institutions and the position of political parties to the question of women's rights (Waylen, 2010, pp. 227, 230). Moreover, the mobilisation of women's rights organisations is also significantly dependent on changes in the political opportunities as we could have seen at the social movement theory while examining the root causes leading to the creation of different social formations.

On one hand, state actors themselves consolidate the subordinated position of women through the maintenance of the rigid division of masculine and feminine attributions. On the other hand, the aforementioned bureaucratic system provides a space for feminist organisations to operate, though in a controlled manner, also called *state feminism* (Waylen, 2007, p. 12.) that has already been discussed as an important concept in the shaping of women's role. In this regard, discourse on topics related to gender

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[50] Freedom in the World Research Methodology, *Freedom House*.

equality is more like a symbolic step than an intention to achieve real changes. A positive gender outcome requires active participation and dialogue between different actors and institutions (Waylen, 2007, p. 15.).

The legacy of the political institutions of the past as a constraint in realising a women-friendly democracy also figures at Moghadam. As Moghadam highlighted, a women-friendly democracy not only depends on the institutional legacy of the past and the mobilisation of women's rights NGOs, but on the capacity of the government to carry out significant social and economic reforms.

While women's political participation, i.e. the percentage of women sitting in the national parliaments, is an important indicator, it represents a more symbolic than a real meaning. This fact was also highlighted by Waylen who saw in government institutions the reproduction of hierarchical gender roles (Waylen, 2010, pp. 227, 230). The indicators related to the percentage of women's share in the national parliament of Tunisia and Morocco also proved the aforementioned findings. In fact, constitutional guarantees for women, female share of the paid labour force, wages of women compared to men's salary, the number and presence of women's rights NGOs and tangible reforms are all indispensable to establishing a more democratic environment (Moghadam, 2015, pp. 8-9.) that can bring about a more women-friendly policy of decision-makers. According to Moghadam the key for the successful democratic transition lies in the previous advancement of promoting women's political participation and rights. However, taking into account the complexity of the Maghreb region both in terms of its social needs, political rights and the secular versus religious division of the society the real test of democracy is whether a social democracy with greater emphasis on health, education and equal job opportunities can be realised (Moghadam, 2015, pp. 11-12.).

With regard to the MENA region in general, it must be pointed out, that while there was a wide attention on women's political mobilisation during the Arab Spring, that at the same time opened some political space for women, it did not automatically grant gender equality. Stephan and Charrad argued that the events of the Arab Spring led to the destruction of Western stereotypes of Muslim women, which often depicted them as subordinated and living in a patriarchal society, however the road to democratisation and the introduction of significant political and socioeconomic measures are still far

away (Stephan – Charrad, 2020, pp. 6-7.). Despite the initial hopes women still remain victims of violence and oppression. Khalil also underlined that the Arab Spring must be understood in the paradox of visible reforms and the existence of violence against women as well as the modernisation efforts of the young generation and the remnants of the patriarchal society (Khalil, 2015, pp. 1-6.).

From the point of the theory of Comparative Political Science the research question of whether greater participation of women in the political processes can bring about democratisation must be treated with caution. According to this it is quite usual that young democracies return to authoritarian tendencies. Taking into account the current processes, Gallien and Werenfels talked about a hybrid democracy and regarded the consolidation of authoritarian practices and the deficiencies of the old regime the biggest constraints to the preservation of the country's previous achievements (Gallien – Werenfels, 2019, pp. 1-2, 5, 7.).

Related to the role of the international order in defining the question of gender in the region it cannot be neglected that the international arena previously characterised by a normative kind of order is currently under transformation. Therefore, the normative kind of order is replaced by a shifting international order that also exercises pressure on how gender issues are or should be viewed in Morocco and Tunisia. In the framework of the relations with its Mediterranean partners the European Union published a new document in 2021 that not only mentions women's empowerment but also defines it as part of the Action plans.

The Joint Communication[51], that proposes a new Agenda for the Mediterranean, is understood in the context of the EU's distinguished partnership with countries of the Southern Neighbourhood and those socioeconomic, political and security challenges this region faces more than ten years following the outbreak of the Arab Spring. These difficulties were further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides other key directions, the new Agenda mentions commitment to human and fundamental rights, equality and democracy in achieving gender equality. Ensuring the economic empowerment of women and youth as well as supporting their participation in decision-making also figure in the action points of the EU's new Agenda.

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[51] Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Renewed partnership with the Southern Neighbourhood. A New Agenda for the Mediterranean [n.d.], pp. 1, 3 and 7.

It is of crucial importance to underline that while the question of gender equality is a topic which is regularly discussed between the European Union and its Mediterranean partners, concrete measures in this direction are still far from being implemented (Ait Mohand, 2009, pp. 139-140.). While great hopes were attached to the Gender Action Plans of the European Union, the third one of which was released in November 2020, the main goals to achieving gender equality could have not been realised so far. As Brechenmacher, Henckes and Lledó emphasised regarding the EU's achievements with its external partners in the field of women's empowerment, including Morocco, one of the biggest problems was the lack of promoting women's participation in politics. Brechenmacher et al. also highlighted the lack of efforts of the EU in including domestic political actors in the process of ensuring women's empowerment (Brechenmacher et al., 2021, pp. 1-2.).

Ait Mohand attributed the fall-back in women's rights in countries of the EU's Mediterranean partners to the particular historical, economic and cultural evolution these states had experienced as well as to the fault line between secularism and religion that also contributed to shaping political processes. Besides the particular characteristics of the countries of the region, the absence of mentioning gender equality as a priority in binding documents is also seen as an obstacle to promoting women's empowerment (Ait Mohand, 2009, p. 139.). While gender equality figures among the main actions of the EU's new Agenda for the Mediterranean, no significant measures have been taken to set up a monitoring mechanism that is responsible for assessing the implementation of the main directives determined in the Agenda.

Considering the aforementioned facts, namely the absence of a monitoring mechanism and the particular characteristics of the EU's Mediterranean parties, it can be said that the EU's views on gender issues only serve as a guideline for the analysed countries. The actions to be achieved in the field of gender equality, including the assurance of equality in the labour market are also part of the agenda of decision-makers in Morocco and Tunisia, though other realities tend to overwrite these goals. The realities must be examined in the context of Morocco's and Tunisia's distinguished political and economic partnership with EU member states, such as Spain and France. Namely with Morocco, the promotion of human rights, the rights of minorities, gender issues or democracy promotion are subordinated to significant security issues or issues related to

the national interests of neighbouring countries, e.g. the containment of illegal migration (Caruso, 2021, pp. 13-14.).

The political leadership of the analysed countries are also influenced by the bottom-up initiatives of sub state actors (women's rights NGOs and activists) as has been explained at the social movement theory and the theory of complex interdependence. However, as representatives of women's rights NGOs explained in the empirical part of the dissertation, the mobilisation of women's rights activists is a complex topic where social, economic and political circumstances must also be taken into account. The EU's views on gender issues in Morocco and Tunisia are subordinated to the actual political and socioeconomic challenges of the concerned countries, therefore they are examined in this context.

4.5.1. The Tunisian case study of democratisation

The democratisation process in Tunisia must be examined in light of the main developments that have been made in the last eleven years following the outbreak of the Arab Spring. According to the analysis of Gallien and Werenfels from the spring of 2019 regarding democracy building in Tunisia the political developments after the second parliamentary and presidential elections and the adoption of the new constitution in 2014 demonstrate a hybrid system with some remnants of the old autocratic regime, namely in the economic, political and administrative fields.

The study from 2019 names three areas where major setbacks can be remarked compared with the initial expectations of the Arab Spring. These are the judiciary, the security sector and the fight against corruption. With regard to the judiciary, the aforementioned analysis evokes the absence of the constitutional court and the problem of transparency (Gallien – Werenfels, 2019, pp. 1-3.). Based on the main findings of the empirical verification the interviewees also saw the absence of awareness regarding constitutional rights and the problem of implementation as one of the biggest burdens in guaranteeing equal rights to both sexes. In addition to the anti-terror laws that risk merging terrorism with individual cases the problem of transparency and the lack of tangible reforms were also identified when examining the prospects of the security sector. As for developments in the economic field the rehabilitation of prominent figures of the old regime, the lack of political will and resources contribute to

maintaining the deficiencies of the previous autocratic regime, thus are counteractive to realising the initial goals of the Arab Spring. The presence of members of the old political elite in decision-making processes further aggravates and deepens the political crisis, thus results in general disappointment and lack of trust towards political institutions among Tunisians (Gallien – Werenfels, 2019, pp. 3-5.).

Referring to Moghadam (2015) and Charrad (2012), the initial measures of the Tunisian government after the events of the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 showed that Tunisia stepped on the road to democratisation. However, such a process takes quite a long time during which decision-makers are tested on all their initiatives that have been made to improve socioeconomic and health conditions. In this regard, there is no doubt that the restoration of political order and confidence among citizens must anticipate such measures. When examining what impact women can exert on decision-makers and whether a more women-friendly environment can bring about democracy it must be underlined that democratisation is not taken for granted, especially in such countries that have no previous experience with democracy. As for Tunisia, the late 1980s following the coming to power of President Ben Ali brought a new perspective from the point of democratisation with initial promises that tended to ensure basic human rights, political plurality and the use of consensus (Gallien – Werenfels, 2019, p. 7.). However, all these were followed by the extermination of opposition parties and the repression of the freedom of expression. Based on the analysis of Gallien and Werenfels and the categorisation and country report of Freedom House, similarities between the political processes at the end of 1980's and the post-Arab Spring period can be noticed with the exception of the proliferation of the civil societies that was quite remarkable after 2011.

As Waylen (1994) emphasised when examining transition to democracy, the narrow, elitist understanding of democracy avoids the inclusion of women's role in the analysis of democracy making. Such an approach is regarded as a research gap since women organise themselves around an important cause or causes, therefore they constitute a significant part of civil society whose role cannot be neglected in the process of democratisation. As an example, she highlighted the key role of women in the Latin American and Eastern European experience of transition to democracy. It must be underlined that in the case of Latin America women used to be excluded from the public (political) sphere and their mobilisation was brought into being by the growing economic and social needs (Waylen, 1994, pp. 334-336, 338-339.). This was not the

case in Tunisia where, as it has been mentioned, state feminism required the maintenance of modern Western values, including women's empowerment. In Tunisia the amelioration of women's position was given significance in the rhetoric of the government since the coming to power of Habib Bourguiba. According to the narrow understanding and the institutionalised approach of democracy such as in Huntington, the active role of civil society is a significant factor of democratisation. However, as practice proves the politicisation of gender equality does not evidently bring about an increased role for women in the public sphere (decision-making). In Latin America for some women's rights organisations the transition period did not provide the expected social rights. In fact, these NGOs found themselves in a more difficult situation than during the authoritarian period (Waylen, 1994, pp. 341-343.).

Therefore, besides the analysis of gender and politics the broader definition of democratisation cannot neglect the social and economic conditions too. As has been previously underlined at the social and economic marginalisation of women the unequal participation of women in the labour market of Tunisia resulted in women only making up 24.9% of the labour market, not to mention that no changes have taken place regarding the decrease of the unemployment rate following the outbreak of the Arab Spring. In 2017 youth unemployment reached 35.4% (Weilandt, 2018, p. 213.). The situation has not changed since currently there are more than one in every three people unemployed in the younger generation, which means a 35.8% unemployment.[52] The deterioration of the socioeconomic conditions of Tunisian people was a gradual process from 2011 that culminated in demonstrations and riots in 2018 due to the austerity measures that were inevitable following the 2.9 billion USD loan from the IMF. Taking into account the poor socioeconomic indicators, namely inside the marginalised interior parts of the country (e.g. Kairouan) or the southern regions (e.g. Tataouine), where unemployment reaches 35%, such riots are not unusual at all (Weilandt, 2018, pp. 212-214.). It cannot be neglected either that the economic loss the touristic sector suffered during the pandemic further aggravated the already fragile situation. The failure of the government to meet the socioeconomic needs of people during this 11 year period is regarded as a dangerous threat to previous democratic achievements, thus serves as a time bomb.

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[52] See the IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2021 [n.d.], pp. 160, 168.

The deterioration of the political and economic conditions is also reflected in the 2022 country report of Freedom House. While Freedom House classified Tunisia as a free country between 2015 and 2021, in 2022 a major setback took place when Tunisia fell back to the level of 2014. Based on the annual evaluation of the political rights and civil liberties Freedom House sets up a global classification for countries according to scores and status. The methodology of the classification of scores is based on the analysis of different subcategories. The electoral processes, political pluralism and participation and the functioning of the government are all examined under political rights (10 questions), while freedom of expression and belief, associational and organisational rights, rule of law and personal autonomy and individual rights are also taken into account regarding civil liberties (15 questions). During the classification points are given from 0 to 4 in each subcategories which mean that an overall 40 points can be granted in terms of political rights. The maximum points in the case of civil liberties are 60 points. Then countries are divided according to their status: not free, partly free and free.[53]

The two categories of political rights and civil liberties were considered, and in 2022 Tunisia received 64 points out of the 100 while in 2021 the overall score was 71. It is clearly seen that the situation of political rights in Tunisia is somehow worrisome compared with the results of the last years: in 2022 a nearly 20% recession took place. According to the country report of 2022, Tunisia received the worst scores in the category of the functioning of the government (1 points out of the 4). Similarly, to the aforementioned report of Gallien and Werenfels from 2019, corruption and the lack of transparency in the security field and in the political arena still remain those fields where immediate measures are a must for a well-functioning government that is able to meet the basic needs of its people. The continuous power conflict between the legislative and executive branches of power makes effective and transparent decision-making impossible. The power conflict was culminated in the dissolution of the parliament in July 2021 (centralisation of power) that disenabled legislative representatives to influence the decision-making process. Regarding corruption, weak enforcement of law, controversial governmental measures (e.g. adoption of the economic reconciliation law, though later amended) and the misuse of fight against

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[53] See Freedom in the World Research Methodology, *Freedom House* [n.d.].

corruption for political and electoral gains are also seen as a crucial point in the political setback of Tunisia.[54]

Table 4 below summarises the classification of the status of Tunisia between 2010 and 2022 (not free, partly free and free) based on the data of Freedom House. The classification of the country is compared with the percentage of women in the national parliament according to the statistics of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, though referring to the main findings of Georgina Waylen (1994) such analysis reflects the quite narrow understanding of democratisation. Therefore, a more profound explanation of the relationship between women's participation in democracy making and the impact of a more women-friendly approach on gender equality is essential in the following.

TUNISIA	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Status	NF*	PF**	PF	PF	PF	F***	F	F	F	F	F	F	PF
Percentage of women in the national parliament	27.6	26.7	26.7	26.7	31.3	31.3	31.3	31.3	31.3	35.9	24.9	26.3	26.3

Table 4: The role of women in the process of democracy building in Tunisia

*NF=Not Free
**PF=Partly Free
***F=Free
Note: the percentage of women in the national parliament is based on the January data of each year
Source: Compiled by the author based on Freedom House and IPU data [n.d.]

According to the narrow, elitist understanding of democracy, the table would suggest that the greater the percentage of women in the national parliament the higher the probability that Tunisia is classified a free country. The previous facts and findings clearly proved that women played a key role in the demonstrations at the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011 that ousted President Ben Ali. They also took an active part in the democratic transition, especially during the drafting of the new constitution which was adopted in January 2014 and which is considered a progressive constitution in terms of providing basic human rights and equality for women. The harsh debates on the complementarity clause of the new constitution, the law on equal inheritance and the proliferation of NGOs, including a number of organisations focusing on the amelioration of women's rights, are tangible results *to what extent women can influence*

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[54] See Freedom in the World 2022, Tunisia, *Freedom House* [n.d.].

the coming to being of a more women-friendly environment. Although, it cannot be forgotten that the country's influential trade union and hidden political actor, UGTT (*Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail; Tunisian General Labour Union*) played a crucial and active role in the mobilisation and empowerment of women since the independence of Tunisia. Due to its diversified network the trade union succeeded in addressing women in the work force, thus being the main advocate of establishing women's financial independence. Moreover, UGTT pursued awareness campaigns for rural women and contributed to the proliferation of the network of civil societies, the members of which it closely collaborated with to exercise pressure on government actors (The Solidarity Center, 2014, pp. 2-7).

From the point of the *mobilisation of women and their impact on democratisation* the transition from authoritarian to a democratic regime is a more complex process in which the presence and activity of civil society is only one factor. Taking into account the brief but concise historical outlook of Tunisia, the country has not yet experienced real democracy. Transitions in general were full of promises but in the end resulted in the consolidation of autocratic rule. As the main indicators of Freedom House demonstrated, the examination of the functioning of government bodies, the electoral process and political competitiveness cannot be neglected when talking about democratisation. In the case of the current thesis the inclusion of gender in the analysis of democratic transition was interesting as this field is still regarded as a research gap in democratisation theories and gender studies. However, as previous studies suggested, the greater participation of women in decision-making processes does not evidently mean that immediate answers are found to issues related to the question of gender equality. Political institutions still reflect the dominance of men and the political arena is part of power conflicts with the presence of such masculine norms as strength and power, thus limiting the scope of women to enforce their claims.

4.5.2. The Moroccan case study of democratisation

Similarly to Tunisia, the geopolitical location of Morocco and the historical experiences of the colonial period determined the political and socio-economic development of the country. As it has been mentioned, the centralisation of power and the rather bottom-up approach towards the question of gender equality had a great impact on the evolution of

women's rights and the mobilisation of women's rights activists. It was only with the succession of King Mohamed VI to the throne in 1999 that a promising period from the point of political and social reforms could come into being.

Besides the development of political rights King Mohamed VI deemed important to achieve tangible results in the economic arena. Therefore, the king urged the promotion of foreign investment. It is important to underline that a significant measure regarding the evolution of women's rights was the realisation of the fact that the reform of the conservative family law (Moudawana) was indispensable to ameliorate the legal position of women. The pressure of Moroccan activists brought about significant changes to the status of women in citizenship rights, marriage, divorce, heritage and guardianship (these positive measures have already been discussed in detail in the previous chapter) (Hursh, 2010, pp. 65-66.), though a difference does exist between substantial reforms and reforms with shallow roots. In connection with the problem of substantial reforms and reforms with shallow roots, Hursh underlined that the process of democracy building is strictly connected with the fundamental problems inherent with the type of government in Morocco. As he mentioned, critics of the monarchy said that the Moroccan political system resembles to a hybrid political system, where government institutions are apparent since the last word is always the word of the king (Hursh, 2010, pp. 75-76.).

Compared with Tunisia the events of the Arab Spring in Morocco took place in a much peaceful manner with rapid measures, e.g. the adoption of a new constitution, as demonstrators did not aim at overthrowing the political system but increasing the role of the legislative power that would bring about a constitutional monarchy. Besides changes in the political arena the socioeconomic conditions, including the high rate of corruption and regional inequalities, also generated a wide range of discontent. The years following the Arab Spring proved that in fact nothing changed in the institutional system of the country, thus the initial reforms were more like "cosmetic" measures. While according to its election program high hopes were attached to the coming to power of the JDP party in 2011 (e.g. providing social justice, amelioration of economic conditions), these expectations were soon winded. The restriction of the freedom of expression is still significant, criticism against the king, or issues related to Islam or the Western Sahara are delicate topics (Caruso, 2021, pp. 3, 11-12.). As the elections proved and prove, only those parties can succeed that cultivate a good relationship with the king. This

demonstrates that similarly to the pre-Arab Spring, and the current political situation in Tunisia, decision-making is strongly centralised. As has been mentioned, the latest, anticipated elections taking place in September 2021 with the victory of the RNI party (Caruso, 2021, pp. 12-13.) brought high hopes with the amelioration of economic conditions and the situation of the youth. These topics are also of crucial importance in light of the post-pandemic situation and the global economic crisis.

According to the 2022 Freedom House report, Morocco received an overall rating of 37 out of 100 and the rating of political rights was less by 13 points than that of Tunisia (13 points for Morocco and 26 points for Tunisia). The country also did worse than Tunisia in civil liberties (24 points compared with 38 points in the case of Tunisia)[55]. It is also important to underline that the overall rating of Morocco decreased in 2019 when Morocco received a total of 39 points. Compared with Tunisia, Morocco did worse regarding the criteria of the electoral process, especially in the legitimacy of the current government. As it has been emphasised, the 2011 constitution did not lead to significant changes in the share of power with the Kking and his advisors remaining the most influential and dominant political actors in decision-making. Consequently, free and fair elections are also questioned, the current pro-palace RNI party does not pose any challenge to the power of the Kking. Lack of transparency, the high rate of corruption and limited possibilities for opposition parties to be included in the share of power are also seen as deficiencies while examining the situation of political rights in Morocco. Related to these deficiencies the arena of sub state actors is also strictly controlled with limited scope for journalists and activists to operate and the use of force to repress demonstrations.

When it comes to the participation of women in decision-making, Morocco made efforts to increase the percentage of female candidates. During the latest elections, the percentage of female candidates was 27% compared with 12% in the case of the municipal elections in 2015 and a certain number of seats (60 seats out of the 395 in the Chamber of Representatives, plus an additional 15 seats) are reserved for women and the current cabinet consists of seven women. However, these achievements are still far

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[55] See Freedom in the World 2022, Morocco, *Freedom House* [n.d.]
See Freedom in the World 2022, Tunisia, *Freedom House* [n.d.].

from that of Tunisia where the 2017 law determines an equal share between men and women at the top of candidate lists.[56]

Similarly to the Tunisian case study, the Table 5 summarises the classification of Morocco between 2010 and 2022 and the evolution of the percentage of women sitting in the national parliament.

MOROCCO		2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Status		PF*	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF	PF
women in the national	LH **	10.5	10.5	17	17	17	17	17%	20.5	20.5	20.5	20.5	20.5	24.1
	UH ***	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.2	2.2	11.7	11.7	11.7	11.7	11.7	11.7	12.5

Table 5: The role of women in the process of democracy building in Morocco

*PF=Partly Free
**=Lower House
***=Upper House
Note: the percentage of women in the national parliament is based on the January data of each year
Source: Compiled by the author based on Freedom House and IPU data [n.d.]

Based on the comparison of Tunisia and Morocco, the classification of Freedom House and the percentage of women sitting in the national parliament would suggest that a correlation does exist between the political status of a country and women's participation in decision-making. The question here that arises is whether women's political participation can really be measured by the number of seats they occupy in the national parliament. As the Tunisian example demonstrated the biggest percentage of women sitting in the national parliament coincided with the period between 2015 and 2021 when Tunisia was classified a free country. However, this achievement lasted until 2022 when the percentage of women significantly dropped back to the conditions of 2013 and the country was reclassified as a partly free one. Contrary to Tunisia, the Moroccan case demonstrates that the increase in the percentage of women sitting in the national parliament does not evidently result in democratisation, Morocco was classified as a partly free country during the analysed period, between 2010 and 2022.

In Tunisia, the previous one or two years before the period of 2015 and 2021 were regarded as quite a favourable time for women. The positive changes were mostly thanks to the adoption of the new constitution, the lifting of Tunisia's reservations to the

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[56] See Freedom in the World 2022, Morocco, *Freedom House* [n.d.].

CEDAW, the abrogation of the law that forbade Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men and the placing of the law of equal inheritance on the agenda. In order to refer to the question of *to what extent women can contribute to the process of democratisation* it can be concluded that women in Tunisia and Morocco played a key role in the efforts of democratisation during and after the Arab Spring, and these efforts brought about tangible results. However, as experts of the topic also assumed, the presence and active role of women's rights NGOs and activists are only one of the conditions to realising a more women-friendly environment. Achieving gender equality requires the complete eradication of stereotypes and the previously mentioned traditional division of gender roles, as well as the "degenderisation" of political institutions. As the increased violence committed against women during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, the legal protection of women can only be guaranteed if previously adopted laws are implemented in practice. However, such measures cannot be realised without a well-functioning government with full transparency. Moreover, the question of gender equality and the possibilities of increasing women's participation in decision-making processes cannot be separated from the actual socioeconomic conditions of the analysed countries. Related to the question of the establishment of a durable democracy in Morocco and Tunisia it is important to underline that neither Morocco, nor Tunisia experienced democratic transition. The political establishment of Morocco has always been characterised by the centralisation of power in the hands of the monarch that only gave little space for the opposition parties to operate. In Tunisia, the continuous fight for political power and the maintenance of the remnants of the old regime (e.g. presence of key figures related to the previous regime, high rate of corruption, lack of transparency) also serve as constraints on democracy.

5. THE EMPIRICAL CORPUS

The empirical corpus seeks to test the main conclusion of the theoretical framework and to combine it with the processes that contributed to the shaping of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia and were mentioned in the case studies section of the previous chapter. It also introduces and analyses the main aspects of women's rights NGOs, some of which have already been mentioned or classified in the previous chapter(s). Moreover, the current chapter also confirms the significant mobilisation of women's rights organisations emphasised during the case study section. Interviews are indispensable to the application of the process-tracing method that examines the correlation between causes and their outcome. As has been mentioned, the research starts off theory testing, but as new findings emerge through deduction, new theories are also about to be concluded.

To be able to test the applied theories, that is, the theory of complex interdependence, the social movement and feminist identity theories, interviews were conducted with representatives and members of NGOs for the rights of Moroccan and Tunisian women. Ten women's rights activists from each country were selected for online interviews that were conducted through Messenger, WhatsApp, or Zoom. Though it did not entirely replace face-to-face interviews regarding the observation of body gestures, the application of these communication methods provided a rather similar feeling than interviews conducted directly by the person concerned. The availability of women's rights NGOs, their location and the diversity of their goals also influenced the selection of interviewees. The answers were recorded by making handwritten notes. During the analysis of the interviews, the researcher grouped the answers into different concepts, which were later compared with the initial coding.

To answer the main research questions and prove or refute the hypotheses, the interviews focused on the degree of cooperation between women's rights activists and decision makers in light of the historical, economic, political, social, and cultural evolution of each country analysed. Related to the top-down or bottom-up approach, particular emphasis was placed on the question of how and to what extent NGOs can influence the government during different periods of time. On the other hand, the

questions also touched on the impact and mobilisation of individuals and the main social constraints that continue to reproduce gender inequalities.

5.1. Main aspects in data collection, arguments, and counterarguments

When discussing the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative interviews as a data collection method in addition to interviewer bias (Creswell, 2009, p. 167.) which is true both in the case of face-to-face and online interviews, online interviews do not provide the possibility to observe the body language and intonation of the person concerned. Opdenakker identified the lack of interaction between the interviewer and his partner as the biggest disadvantage of online interviews (Opdenakker, 2006, pp. 5-6.).

Novick also mentioned the lack of visual experience and the risk of distortion among the disadvantages of telephone interviews (in this case online interviews), although no significant evidence can prove the information mentioned above (Novick, 2008, pp. 392-393, 397.). However, compared to the face-to-face solution of data collection, this technique offers a greater degree of anonymity for the questioned person. Moreover, in the case of online interviews, a wider range of partners can be involved who probably would not be available during the face-to-face technique of data collection. Despite the absence of personal experience and standardisation, interviews conducted in the online space are cost-effective (Opdenakker, 2006, pp. 5-6.) and in this pandemic situation they offer an alternative to fieldwork.

Based on the method of *template analysis* mentioned in the data collection section of the dissertation, the *initial coding* was explained at the very beginning of the research which operated with the concepts the researcher deemed important from the point of view of the work of women's rights NGOs (question of financing, circumstances, crises, cooperation, obstacles, etc.). In light of the solution to the question of gender inequality that pointed beyond national borders, the researcher also focused on *the extent* to which women's rights NGOs can mobilise other women and *what kind of* impact they can have on decision makers. Thus, the four main concepts set up before the conduction of the interviews included *cooperation*, *crises*, *influence,* and *obstacles*. The open-ended, semi-structured questions[57] also gathered around the aforementioned themes. An important part of the interviews included questions related to the effects of the

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[57] The questions posed to the representatives of women's rights NGOs can be found in Appendix 1.

pandemic, in this sense, if there is a correlation between the pandemic and the increased collaboration among NGOs for women's rights.

Despite the main concerns of the researcher about online interviews compared to face-to-face meetings with NGOs, no serious difficulties were identified, the special circumstances did not influence the implementation of the empirical research in great part. Following the interviews, the initial codes in each category were extended to include international norms (e.g., conventions) and its effects on non-state actors, as well as the economic empowerment of women, the historical obstacles, constraints related to the mentality of people and the correlation between the consolidation of male-dominated norms.

Figure 5 illustrates the changes in the initial and final interpretation of the categories applied during the interviews:
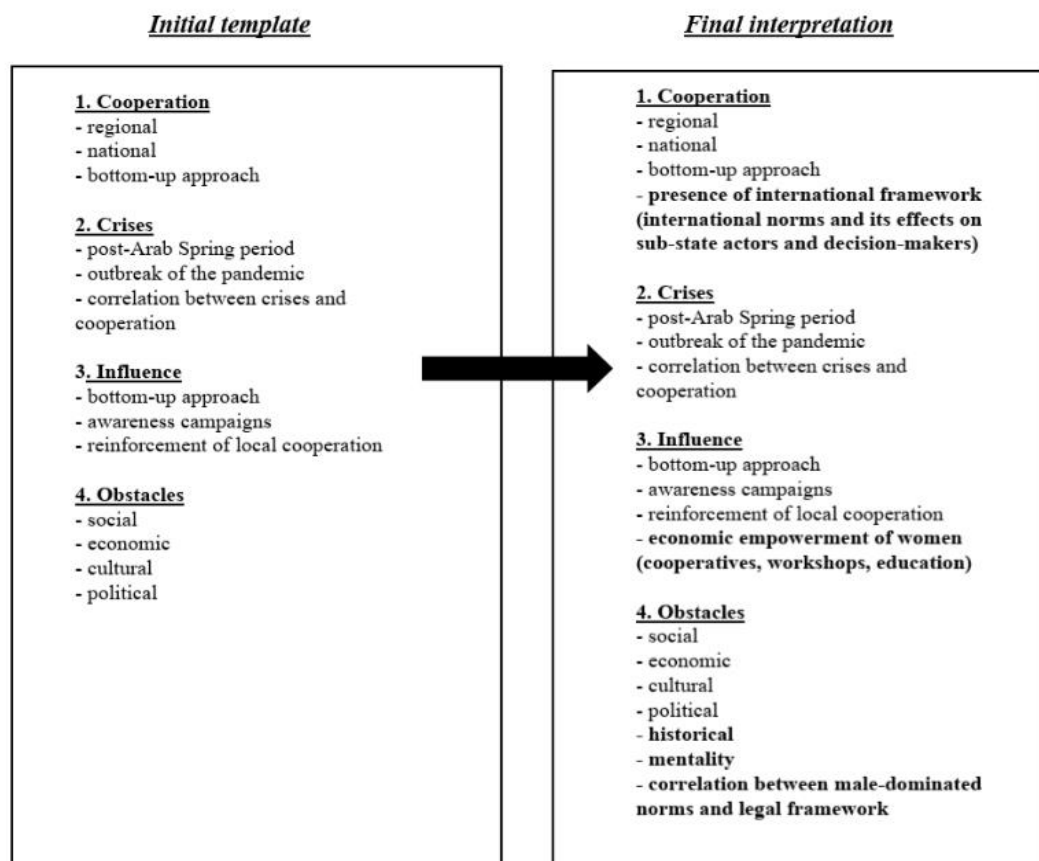

Figure 3. Interpretations of the categories applied during the interviews

5.2. Participants in the interviews

As has partly been mentioned at the data collection part of the dissertation, participants in the interviews have quite different backgrounds, including activists whose efforts transcend national boundaries as well as activists working in marginalised regions to improve the conditions of rural women. The participation of a large variety of NGOs also enabled the researcher to listen to diverse opinions of the research topic and draw conclusions. While in general the answers reflected similarities, namely in connection with the management of the challenges of the pandemic, representatives of rural organisations in general showed differences in their opinions. The semi-structured questions played an important role in this matter as they provided a bigger scope for the interviewer and resulted in interviewees expressing themselves more freely. Another important element to highlight in Tunisia regarding actors at the micro level is the proliferation of non-governmental organisations the country witnessed following the events of the end of 2010 and beginning of 2011. Most of the organisations that were involved in the interviews were founded after 2011.

Based on the classification set up by Moghadam, the *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement* (AFTURD) is classified as an institute which focuses on women's studies while *Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne* (UNFT) is an NGO with political affiliation. Besides the older types of organisations, a newer generation of women's rights NGOs were also questioned whose profile included activities related to sustainable development, the promotion of education, the assurance of technical assistance, the implementation of different projects and community development in specific regions (Moghadam, 1997, pp. 32-40.). The Moroccan *High Atlas Foundation (HAF)* or the Djerba-based *Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba* and *Association Amel Ghizen* belonged to these categories. Regarding organisations that aim to embrace women of marginalised regions it must be highlighted that representatives of such formations often face criticism labelling these organisations as elitists represented by educated middle-class women who might not be receptive to resolving the problems of the poor, disabled and undereducated women of the rural regions (Moghadam, 1997, pp. 33-34.).

Regarding representatives belonging to the same women's rights organisations, in Morocco, three activists, members of the *High Atlas Foundation,* while in Tunisia two

activists, both members of the *Association of Tunisian Women for the Research on Development* (AFTURD) and another two activists of the *Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba* were questioned. This means that in Morocco and Tunisia the researcher realised altogether twenty interviews, ten from Morocco and ten from Tunisia, with thirteen NGOs. Among the thirteen NGOs six were consulted from Morocco and seven from Tunisia. Three women's rights activists, recognised in the international arena due to their remarkable efforts in terms of the promotion of gender equality and their extended network of other activists, were also questioned from Morocco and Tunisia.

Founded in 2000, the Marrakech-based High Atlas Foundation (HAF) is a Moroccan association and US non-profit organisation that is committed to promoting sustainable development for the empowerment and education of women and youth.[58] The organisation was also chosen for the interview, as its activities also include improving the conditions of rural women. The other five women's rights activists interviewed are from the Rabat-based *La Voix de la Femme Amazighe (The Voice of the Amazighe Woman),*[59] the *Without She I Would Never Be a He,*[60] the *Coalition ISRAR pour l'Empowerment et l'Égalité* (*ISRAR Coalition for empowerment and equality*),[61] the Marrakech-based *Association Ennakhil,*[62] and the *Association Épanouissement Féminin*[63] organisations. Besides questioning representatives and presidents of the Moroccan civil society, questions were posed to two independent women's rights activists, a former delegate-minister for women conditions, family and children protection, minister-delegate for the Moroccans living abroad, ex-ambassador of Morocco to Canada,[64] and the president and founder of the Rabat-based Africa

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[58] See the official website of the High Atlas Foundation. The interviews with the three representatives of HAF were conducted on 14 August, 10 and 30 September 2021 via Messenger and Zoom.

[59] La Voix de la Femme Amazighe [n.d.]. The interview with the president of La Voix de la Femme Amazighe was realised through WhatsApp on 24 September 2021.

[60] The women's rights NGO, Without She I Would Never Be a He is only available through the organisation's official Facebook page.
The representative of the Without She I Would Never Be a He was questioned on 28 September via WhatsApp.

[61] European Endowment for Democracy [n.d.]. The interview with member of the Coalition ISRAR was conducted on 14 October 2021.

[62] Development Assistance Roadmap Portal in the Middle East [n.d.]. The representative of Ennakhil was questioned on 15 March 2022 via Messenger.

[63] The women's rights NGO, Association Épanouissement Féminin is only available through the organisation's official Facebook page. The interview was conducted via Messenger on 26 May 2022.

[64] The researcher conducted the interview with the former Moroccan minister on 29 June 2022 via WhatsApp.

Women's Forum.[65] The organisations involved in the empirical research demonstrate the conditions of rural women as well as the cultural and ethnic diversity of Morocco; therefore they provide a sufficient and representative base for analysis.

In Tunisia, questions were posed to the representative of the regional bureau of UNFT (*Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne, National Union of Tunisian Women*) in Kelibia (a city in north eastern Tunisia, which belongs to Nabeul Governorate). The Tunisian UNFT is the largest and oldest women's rights NGO established during Tunisia's independence. The organisation is dedicated to working on the promotion of civil rights, participation in political life and education, and combating domestic violence committed against women.[66] Other women's rights activists interviewed included the president of the Tunisia-based l'*Association Patrimoine pour l'Economie Solidaire* (APES, *Heritage Association for Solidarity Economy*),[67] the secretary general of the *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement* (AFTURD, *Association of Tunisian Women for the Research on Development*),[68] who is also an active member of the Tunisian syndicate, UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail [*Tunisian General Labour Union*]).[69] The fourth activist interviewed is also a member of the AFTURD. In addition to them, questions were also posed to the representatives of the *Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes* (*League of Tunisian Women Voters*),[70] the Djerba-based *Association Citoyenneté et Libertés* (ACL, *Association for Citizenship and Liberties*),[71] the *Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba*[72] and the *Association Amel Ghizen*[73]. The latter three organisations were chosen to draw conclusions on the conditions of rural women in southern regions as all of them are based on the island of Djerba with a particular historical, ethnical and cultural

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[65] The interview with the president and founder of Africa Women's Forum was conducted on 20 June 2022 via WhatsApp.

[66] See the official website of the Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne [n.d.].
The representative of UNFT Kelibia was interview via Messenger on 21 September 2021.

[67] See the official website of the Association Patrimoine pour l'Économie Solidaire (APES). The founder of APES was questioned in a Messenger interview on 7 October 2021.

[68] The women's rights NGO, AFTURD is only available through the organisation's official Facebook page. The two members of the AFTURD were questioned through Messenger on 9 October and 13 November 2021.

[69] See the official website of the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail.

[70] See the official website of the Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes. The interview was conducted on 16 November 2021 via Messenger.

[71] See the official website of the Association Citoyenneté et Libertés (ACL). The representative of ACL was questioned through Messenger on 24 December 2021.

[72] Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba [n.d.]. The interview with the two representatives of AJEM were conducted via Messenger on 5 and 14 January 2022.

[73] Association Amel Ghizen [n.d.]. The member of the Association Amel Ghizen was questioned through WhatsApp on 3 August 2022.

background that differ from other parts of the country. An interview was also conducted with a Tunisian activist whose work is well recognised outside the boundaries of Tunisia, she is a member of the Women, Peace and Security Committee of the African Union. In Tunisia, the activist also plays a key role in the traditional type, also called service-oriented NGOs, including the Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne, the Ligue Nationale des droits de l'homme, the Association tunisienne des femmes democrats and the Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développement.[74] Based on the aforementioned details about the selection of Tunisian women's rights NGOs, the Tunisian sample also provides a wide range of information on the conditions of urban and rural women. The interviews in Morocco and Tunisia took place between August 2021 and August 2022. For the protection of personal rights, the researcher preferred to keep the identities of the interviewees anonymous.

The questions posed during the interviews included the *objectives of the associations*, the *future challenges in light of the pandemic*, intra-state and regional *cooperation with other NGOs*, and the *biggest constraints for achieving gender equality.*

5.3. The consequences of the pandemic on women

Both HAF and UNFT Kelibia stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had a serious impact on public life, including the conditions of women and the previous plans and objectives of their organisations, mainly due to the cancellation of seminars and workshops. However, according to HAF, the pandemic also urged the organisation to adapt to the changing situation by developing a work plan and organising live or pre-recorded training sessions that involve closer cooperation with US volunteers. According to the second member of the organisation, the pandemic brings about personal development for women, which results in an improvement in women's conditions in the long-run.

The Moroccan *Ennakhil* association also shared the same opinion as HAF regarding the consequences of the pandemic on women and on the activities of the organisation. The pandemic obliged the transformation of the activities of *Ennakhil* and its adaptation to new strategies. The association listed the following strategies: setting up a phone number for abused women to demand urgent help, creation of different WhatsApp

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[74] The researcher questioned the Tunisian activist on 20 May 2022, The interview took place on Messenger.

groups for sharing information and directing women to the appropriate centres, the creation of different audio clips to publish on social media websites and the organisation of seminars and awareness campaigns in virtual form. However, these new tasks also posed extra charges on the association in terms of time. From the point of view of women's rights according to the representative of *Ennakhil*, the pandemic shed light on the complicated situation in which certain women live and triggered collective actions, initiatives, recommendations from the side of the state and from the civil sphere. As for short-term measures, education, awareness campaigns, mobilisation in the media, the reinforcement of the institutional framework and the increase of assistance for victims of violence are indispensable.

The Tunisian AFTURD also emphasised adaptation and highlighted the advantages of teleworking.

Regarding the consequences of the pandemic, the Djerba-based *Association Citoyenneté et Libertés* (ACL) founded in 2012 stated that despite the increase of violence against women and the slowdown of the organisation's activities, the pandemic can be exploited as NGOs play a key role in drawing greater attention to gender inequalities. In strict collaboration with women's rights groups, the women's rights organisation is currently doing fieldwork that analyses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Tunisian women.

The second Moroccan NGO interviewed, *La Voix de Femme Amazighe,* also raised issues that reinforced the consequences of the pandemic on women (*the organisation referred to the increase in violence committed against women*). According to the founder of the Moroccan *Association Épanouissement Féminin* violence committed against women increased by 30% in Morocco during the pandemic. Moreover, those women who worked in vulnerable sectors and were exposed to violence did not have other possibilities other than finding a shelter with families. From the point of financing, the activities of the organisations were significantly cut back during the pandemic. Problems related to the financing of NGOs during the pandemic were highlighted by the president of the Africa Women's Forum, which also required the organisation to find alternative solutions. The Africa Women's Forum launched a program under the name of "challenges and initiatives" to address women in cyberspace who could share experiences and solutions about the increase of verbal violence. The second Moroccan

independent activist, former delegate-minister for women conditions, family and children protection, and Moroccans living abroad also talked about the problem of increased violence committed against women during the pandemic. Interestingly she praised the rapid and effective measure of the government and NGOs to provide protection for victims of violence, especially for illiterate women who were enabled to send audio clips to different associations. To evoke, this innovation was also mentioned by the representative of *Ennakhil*. Besides violence, she touched upon the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic on women, highlighting the need to provide assistance to women coming from the most marginalised classes of society. Despite the aforementioned challenges, the pandemic also taught decision-makers and women's rights activists to take more responsibility for trying to find effective solutions for women.

The negative impact of the pandemic on the organisation of *La Voix de Femme Amazighe* resulted in the cancellation of fieldwork, which constitutes its largest and most important objective. Similarly to the *Association Épanouissement Féminin,* a decrease in the organisation's funding and regional cooperation with other NGOs were also disadvantages of the pandemic. Furthermore, the interviewee of *La Voix de Femme Amazighe* stated that "the pandemic negatively affected the conditions of those women who work in small cooperatives and informal sectors such as hammams and hairdressers, and this led to the impoverishment of women" (Hayat M., personal communication, 24 September 2021). The organisation highlighted the impoverishment of women, an opinion also shared by the *Association Patrimoine pour l'Economie Solidaire*.

The *Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes* represented the same train of thought relating to the aggravation of the economic marginalisation of women and stated that women working in small cooperatives are the most exposed to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic with very limited access to healthcare services. In this regard, the representative emphasised that her organisation started awareness campaigns through social media to help women in their needs. Furthermore, the Women's Rights Organization also wrote an open letter to politicians in which it drew attention to the poor conditions of Tunisian women working in the private sector. The NGO does not see any difference in the conditions of women after 2011 and the outbreak of the

pandemic in 2020. Although some progress can be noted in the political field, no significant development was achieved in the economic and social fields.

On the one hand, representatives of the *Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba* highlighted the social consequences of the pandemic, namely the degradation of women's rights in education, in the labour market, or the increase in domestic violence committed against women. On the other hand, women had to stand on two fronts; in the healthcare and at home. Despite generalisations about the positive or negative consequences of the pandemic on women's rights, a middle-way approach should be taken. While admitting the social consequences the pandemic brought about and the cessation of fieldwork, the second representative, executive director of AJEM explained that the difficulties they faced made them stronger, and the association tried to be active in other fields. With other NGOs, AJEM continued distributing masks and products necessary for fighting against COVID-19. She explained that AJEM has different commissions ranging from those that deal with the topic of biodiversity, environmental protection education and women. The association had two projects during the pandemic, one helping abused and underqualified women coming from poorer regions of Tunisia, some of them did not benefit from the network of social security. The second project helped women to access water during the pandemic.

The exemplary collaboration experienced by the more traditional and isolated, but solitary community of Djerba was also underlined by the representative of *Amel Ghizen*. However, contrary to the mainstream opinion about the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women's rights the representative emphasised that inequalities derive from problems in the mind set of people, thus are independent from the pandemic. An interesting fact was that personally speaking, the representative did not find the period of the pandemic more complicated, in fact she was working so hard collaborating with other associations to provide the necessary tools for hospitals and to help people in need. Moreover, she also cooperated with 30 other local organisations to provide food for African migrants present on the island. Besides these projects her association pursues charity work and assures such casual tasks like day-care facilities for children and sports facilities (pétanque and kung fu club) for women.

The Tunisian activist, member of the Women, Peace and Security Committee of the African Union and member of several Tunisian NGOs, UNFT, the Ligue Nationale des

droits de l'homme, ATFD and AFTURD partly shared the opinion of other activists, highlighting the increase of violence against women during the pandemic and the difficulties in the financing of NGOs.

Besides the aforementioned impacts of the pandemic, women's rights NGOs in Tunisia raised issues related to the same consequences that Moroccan organisations discussed about the impact of COVID-19 on their activities. The *Association Patrimoine pour l'Economie Solidaire* highlighted problems related to the financing of the organisation and the cancellation of events.

The member of the Moroccan *Coalition ISRAR* saw digitalisation as a key element in the post-COVID period: "the gist of digitalisation is to support illiterate women, but in addition to this, the empowerment of women and the elimination of violence are also important" (Houda B., personal communication, 14 October, 2021). Despite the negative impacts of the pandemic on the activities of NGOs, the *Coalition ISRAR* believes that if an association is well organised, the current crisis can contribute to the improvement of the conditions of women.

Despite admitting the negative consequences of COVID-19 on the conditions of women, *Without She I Would Never Be a He* also emphasised that one of the positive outcomes of the pandemic was manifested in more effective support for women. The main goal of the organisation is to achieve the economic independence of women: "Of course there are negative impacts of the pandemic, such as increased violence committed against women or poverty, but on the other hand we can provide more support to women. Achieving economic independence is our priority, it is the key to everything" (Zeineb C., personal communication, 28 September 2021).

5.4. Intra-state and regional cooperation

Concerning the category of regional or intra-state cooperation, both HAF, *Ennakhil* and UNFT Kelibia claimed that working with other national or international NGOs with the same objectives will contribute to the creation of a comprehensive vision in terms of approaching the question of gender equality. *Ennakhil* emphasised the positive impact of regional cooperation in the sharing of information, good practices and responding to the regional needs of women. However, it also underlined the disadvantages of intra-state cooperation, including regional inequalities and differences in the capacities of

organisations. The founder of Africa Women's Forum expressed a rather positive, but moderate approach to regional cooperation. The organisation established a network consisting of different offices in Ghana and Benin to connect Moroccan women with women of North Africa and the Sub-Saharan region. While in the case of some NGOs the pandemic launched a wider range of cooperation, it also shed light on the limits of collaboration in certain regions (e.g. poor socioeconomic conditions and limited access to telecommunications facilities). These deficiencies also urged decision-makers to elaborate different strategies for the amelioration of women's position. HAF collaborates with the Empowerment Institute in the United States, and UNFT Kelibia cooperates with the Spanish Assembly of Cooperation for Peace (ACPP). The latter observed that an advantage of the pandemic was that it brought about a greater awareness campaign among women to improve their rights. This view is also shared by HAF referring to the need for complementary activities, such as workshops, to raise awareness and empower women on how to better enforce their social and economic rights.

The co-founder of the NGO *Without She I Would Never Be a He* reinforced his willingness in this matter by emphasising the NGO's regional coordination efforts with Tunisian and Mauritanian women's rights organisations. The founder of the *Association Épanouissement Féminin* was also keen on regional collaboration, although the pandemic reduced its activities to cooperation with local organisations. The founder believed that only a strong, top-down approach could lead to tangible results, as an example she mentioned the Collectif 95-Maghreb Égalité and emphasised the role of other NGOs in triggering the reform of the Moudawana in 2004.

The *Coalition ISRAR* stated that the organisation aims to create a working group that can boost the previous cooperation of the former regional initiative known as the Collectif 95-Maghreb Égalité.

The president of *La Voix de la Femme Amazighe* stated that "due to the pandemic, the NGO does not continue to cooperate with other regional partners and the dialogue with Tunisian and Libyan NGOs has stopped" (Hayat M., personal communication, 24 September 2021).

In the case of Tunisia, the responses of the NGOs were similar to those of Morocco, with the exception of the *Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba*

and APES. The latter one clearly underlined that "due to problems related to the question of financing, I do not believe that the cooperation of women's rights organisations with the same objectives can have any positive result" (Aida B.A., personal communication, 7 October 2021). The first representative of the *Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba* stated that intrastate cooperation seems to be less effective than local collaboration since regional cooperation is generally an ad hoc one and others states also struggle to manage their own problems. However, she also has some reservations to local collaboration, namely when it comes to an all-inclusive participation of women in conferences. Women working in vulnerable conditions, e.g. in the agricultural sector, or in factories cannot participate in such discussions, thus their inclusion necessitates being present in the field and explaining their rights. The association cooperates with other women's rights NGOs from Algeria, European countries and the USA, but the pandemic brought together AJEM and other Tunisian NGOs. She mentioned that women were left alone, especially in isolated places such as the island of Djerba where they were obliged to cope with the difficulties of the pandemic on their own. AJEM and other women's rights NGOs distributed medicines and cleaning products to local families. Related to intra-state cooperation, the second representative acknowledged the collaboration the association has with women's rights NGOs from Libya, Algeria or Morocco, especially in sharing common experiences, but added that tangible results are still far from the expectations.

AFTURD evoked the advantages of intra-state and regional cooperation, stating that "only collective actions can bring about change" (Menana Z., personal communication, 13 November 2021). The initiative of the organisation includes collaboration with rural associations as well as other regional or international organisations, including NGOs from Palestine, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, and Lebanon in the field of violence committed against women. The positive impacts of collaboration with local associations sharing the same goals were underlined by the founder of *Amel Ghizen*, adding that "unity makes strength" (Feten G., personal communication, 3 August 2022).

The *Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes* founded in 2011 following the events of the Arab Spring in Tunisia also highlighted the importance of intrastate cooperation. The NGO played an active role in the political mobilisation of women that could not have been realised without the activities of other platforms, organisations, syndicates, or research centres (e.g. Credif, UGTT, or the Tunisian League for the political rights of women).

The cooperation is still active; since 2011 *Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes* works in coalition with other organisations to improve the social and economic rights of women in four regional governorates (Tunis, Medenine, Jendouba, and Nabeul). The ACL also believes in a wide range of collaborations with women's rights NGOs that share the same interests. The organisation used to maintain a tight cooperation with mainly francophone organisations. However, similarly to the *Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes,* the *Association Citoyenneté et Libertés* prefers intra-state cooperation to regional ones to promote an effective resolution of domestic challenges. The representative of ACL mentioned that the Arab Spring opened the way for freedom of expression, thanks to which the organisation could deal with such delicate questions as the radicalisation of youth or violence committed against women.

The importance of intra-state cooperation was also shared by the Tunisian activist, member of the Women, Peace and Security Committee of the African Union, who firmly stated that only international cooperation can guarantee the achievement of gender equality. She was the interviewee who completely saw intra-state cooperation the most effective method to providing equal rights between men and women. That is why she is a member of several women's rights NGOs. Education and fieldwork are particularly important in the promotion of gender equality and in establishing the basis of democracy. As for education, she expressed her regret and worries on the current indicators; while in 2010 more than 90% of children participated in primary and secondary education, in 2011 more than 100,000 children left school before the age of compulsory school attendance, which is 16 years. To answer the question of which circumstances led to the decrease in school attendance, she held Islamists, especially Ennahda responsible for the current situation. Not to forget, the first representative of AJEM Djerba also evoked the problem of school dropout being attributed to the growing influence of the Islamists.

The Moroccan former delegate-minister for women conditions, family and children protection shared a different position about the impacts of regional cooperation between women's rights NGOs. An important achievement does not always require the collaboration of different NGOs, sometimes even one organisation is enough to exert pressure on decision-makers. A cooperation of different NGOs necessitates a well-defined project. "We live in a transitional society where civil societies, too must adapt to the changing circumstances" (Nouzha C., personal communication, 29 June 2022).

Without mobilisation and the support of the social network regional cooperation will run out of steam sooner or later. As an example, the activist evoked the Collectif 95-Maghreb Égalité.

Overall, with the exception of the Moroccan former delegate-minister for women conditions, family and children protection, the interviews proved that despite the initial efforts to increase regional cooperation, intra-state collaboration of NGOs is more effective; therefore, it remains quite strong. According to women's rights organisations, decision makers must pay attention to such efforts to address questions and problems related to inequalities between men and women.

5.5. Major challenges to achieving gender equality

Another significant question posed to women's rights organisations was the identification of social and cultural norms that serve as restrictions in the achievement of gender equality. There was a consensus that social, cultural, and traditional norms are obstacles to equality between sexes. HAF identified social, cultural, and traditional norms, and the lack of access to education, the labour market, and health and legal services as major constraints to gender equality. According to the second member who was questioned from the organisation, the lack of legal knowledge (e.g. minimum age of marriage) is related to the deficiencies in education and is considered to be one of the biggest obstacles to achieving gender equality. Women living in remote areas are the most affected by illiteracy, especially women in their 50s. Therefore, the NGO has already taken some steps to contribute to the elimination of the illiteracy rate. In addition to this, the organisation also works to increase women's self-confidence to enable them to change their conditions. However, since 2011, the government also launched a strategic plan that leans upon the young generation, and the effects of which can be seen in the social and economic fields. Inequalities in education were identified by the president of Africa Women's Forum as one of the biggest challenges to achieving gender equality. The situation is worrisome in the remote areas of Morocco where the high rate of illiteracy is accompanied by child marriage. Traditional norms, economic and religious constraints were also mentioned by the president among these challenges.

According to the founder of the Moroccan *Association Épanouissement Féminin*, constraints in achieving gender equality have cultural and political origins too ("*masochist culture*"). Similarly, to the Tunisian activist, members of the Women, Peace and Security Committee of the African Union also embedded the evolution of women's rights in the religious discourse and believed that the appearance of Islamists after the Arab Spring brought about a regression in terms of gender equality. The founder of the organisation underlined that Islamists created a very rigid and conservative milieu that are counterproductive to establishing an effective cooperation between women's rights NGOs and decision-makers.

Similarly, to HAF, the representative of *Ennakhil* also agreed that cultural challenges ("*toxic masculinity*") pose a serious burden to providing equality between men and women. The representative also added political and regional differences, "it is difficult to transfer rapidly the same progressive measures applied in Rabat to Draa-Tafilalet" (exact name not communicated, representative in the name of the association, personal communication, 15 March 2022). Public funding is another constraint that pushes decision-makers to consider other priorities. In order to fight against these challenges, the Moroccan NGO has succeeded in increasing the literacy rate of women, created a cooperative for women and empowered several women who are now entrepreneurs, and who established their own enterprises. Due to the assistance of the organisation several female candidates were elected to the parliament or the regional council in Marrakech-Safi.

Contrary to the social and cultural constraints, the former delegate-minister for women conditions, family and children protection raised the problem of implementation of law. According to her, the Moroccan constitution has not been implemented in practice. In addition to this, she mentioned that the educational system in Morocco has not achieved the level necessary for inducing change in the mentality of people (the dominance of masculine norms is still present). That is why women are underrepresented in decision-making.

Related to the aforementioned social, cultural and traditional norms, the first representative of the *Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba* saw the return of a more conservative mentality since the outbreak of the Arab Spring one of the biggest constraints to the evolution of women's rights. She stated that "in 2011 we

were on the right track, but a regression took place since then" (Najah H., personal communication, 5 January 2022). In this regard, she primarily held Ennahda responsible for the propagation of Quranic schools in the last 10 years. In this context she also blamed the party for the increase of school dropouts and the illiteracy rate, that reaches 20-30% among women. In parallel, the poverty rate also increases and the more it increases, the more a regression takes place in terms of gender equality. The representative identified the lack of knowledge about personal rights as one of the biggest problems in promoting women's empowerment. The situation is especially worrisome in the labour market where men generally receive a daily salary of 45 Tunisian dinar (approximately 5600 HUF), while women only earn 25 dinar (equivalent of 3100 HUF). While the women's rights activist and syndicalist referred to a political regression after the Arab Spring, the pandemic period is seen as a regression in the socioeconomic situation. According to her, the current financial crisis has focused on providing basic living conditions thus overwriting the fight for achieving gender equality and putting women's empowerment into the shade. The second representative and executive director of AJEM Djerba also shared the point of view of the first activist regarding the lack of knowledge on how to enforce basic individual rights. She blamed the lack of communication for this deficiency. Similarly to the first interviewee, she replied that the biggest barriers to realising gender equality are found in economic inequalities. Women are present in all fields of the labour market, including agriculture, but their official recognition by the government remains a crucial problem. The executive director also highlighted the problem of the low participation of women in the political field, the solution of which lies in education and a change in the mentality of people; and education is a prerequisite to a radical change in thinking. She also added that these two elements are pillars to democracy building. In fact, women of the developed northern regions and women coming from the South are all the same, the differences can only be found in the lack of opportunities. As for the efforts of AJEM in fighting against the social, economic and cultural barriers to gender equality, the executive director emphasised the importance of capacity building and awareness campaigns. These campaigns are indispensable in the southern regions of Tunisia where traditional social or cultural norms still impede women to openly speak about domestic violence.

Cultural barriers were also emphasised by the Tunisian activist, member of the Women, Peace and Security Committee of the African Union and several Tunisian NGOs. According to her education has nothing to do with mentality, even a graduated woman can have inflexible ideas that are unable to be changed. As she mentioned, "this is the question of the culture". The activist told the interviewer about her experiences with a woman from the countryside, who despite being under-educated, expressed her support for the law on equal inheritance. Regarding the changes to people's mentality, as has been mentioned at AJEM Djerba, the pursuance of awareness campaigns and field-work is a must. The activist also revealed that she participated in a project that aimed at ameliorating the quite negative image of women in society. Participants pursued a nationwide campaign that included the visit of the management of different radio stations in Tunisia. As a consequence, today women hold open debates on political or economic questions in different TV or radio programs.

The founder of *Amel Ghizen* represented a quite different point of view when it comes to the biggest challenges in achieving gender equality. According to her, gender inequalities are not only present in Tunisia, but in some European countries, too. She also added that inequalities derive from different mind sets and are independent from the pandemic or other circumstances. For her, the establishment of democracy requires a strong leader capable of managing all the challenges, but such a leader does not evidently have to be a female. She does not believe in differentiating between men and women. Similarly to other Tunisian representatives, she agreed that the establishment of women's economic independence is a key to reducing domestic violence.

Although UNFT Kelibia stated that following the Arab Spring, some progress was made in the consolidation of previous achievements guaranteed by the CSP, realising equality in job opportunities and decision making remain two key areas where further development would be of great importance. The local NGO saw the lack of self-confidence as one of the biggest obstacles to achieving equality between men and women. In this sense, the organisation played an important role in supporting several female candidates during the last municipal elections and started working on the creation of a local bureau for female entrepreneurs in Kelibia before the pandemic.

The *Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes* argued that the greatest restrictions to achieving equal conditions between men and women are sought in social and economic

inequalities. Therefore, the elimination of these inequalities is a prerequisite for the political empowerment of women.

As the main objective of the Djerba-based *Association Citoyenneté et Libertés* is to spread the democratic culture and promote human rights, the representative of the organisation saw the lack of knowledge about basic rights and the absence of rights to culture and intellectual development as the biggest challenge in realising equality between men and women. The situation is further aggravated by the poor socioeconomic conditions of women, especially in the southern regions of the country (Djerba, Medenine, and Tataouine governorates) where the association operates.

The increased participation of women in decision making was also a significant goal of the *Without She I Would Never Be a He* NGO in Morocco and in Tunisia for the UNFT Kelibia, the *Association Patrimoine pour l'Economie Solidaire* and the *Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes.* The latter regarded the increase in women's capacity in the political and economic field as a priority in the continuation of the struggle of women to achieve gender equality. The aim of the organisation is to participate actively in the next legislative or municipal elections. Related to women's political empowerment, the representative of the *Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes* evoked the success women achieved during the presidential elections in 2014 and 2019 when 8 and 4 members of the NGO were elected to the parliament. According to the representative questioned during the research the previous achievements are clear proof that in case of a strong intention women are able to assert control over decision-makers which will result in the elimination of violence in the labour market as well as in society.

In general, the empirical findings showed that the organisations in Tunisia outperformed those in Morocco in terms of women's participation in the decision making process. In addition to the existing traditional norms, it is also crucial to highlight the historical perspective and presence of male-dominated norms originating from the heritage of a traditional society and the French colonial past. According to *Coalition ISRAR,* "there is no monitoring and no protection for women". Furthermore, the availability of statistics regarding the conditions of women in Morocco and Tunisia is not sufficient, as in most cases statistics do not cover the reality.

The lack of financing and a competent labour force to collaborate with local NGOs were also identified as obstacles to achieving gender equality. AFTURD highlighted the main

achievements in eliminating illiteracy, but emphasised that the results of these measures are not apparent, as inequalities are present in the labour market and in decision making. AFTURD considered the realisation of equality a key to women's empowerment. According to the interviewees, the high unemployment rate of educated women who graduated from school was the most troublesome obstacle to improving the conditions of women.

5.6. Objectives of NGOs: is a bottom-up approach possible?

When it comes to the main research question (that is, whether women's rights organisations in Morocco and Tunisia believe in the application of a top-down approach after the Arab Spring uprising and during the COVID-19 crisis), the responses of the NGO interviewees in general were positive. HAF believes that by promoting intensive training programs and establishing local cooperatives, sub state actors can contribute to reforming rigid social norms that clearly do not help with decreasing gender inequality. The NGO also highlighted success stories when women's empowerment brought about real results. In 2015, upon a request of a French company, the organisation collaborated with 32 women through the establishment of a local cooperative. Due to the sale of basic products they collected from L'Oréal, women working in that cooperative managed to become financially independent and support their families.

Awareness campaigns and reforms to increase women's participation in national parliaments also play a role in women's rights NGOs, such as *La Voix de la Femme Amazighe, Ennakhil*, Africa Women's Forum and *Without She I Would Never Be a He*. The latter NGO, along with the *Association Patrimoine pour l'Economie Solidaire* also emphasised the establishment of the economic independence of women by launching different programs as a key step towards achieving gender equality. Their emphasis on local cooperation in the bottom-up approach is vital for success. As for *Ennakhil*, the organisation pursued awareness campaigns, lobbying and exerted pressure on decision-makers. The same efforts were underlined by the founder of *Association Épanouissement Féminin*, too. According to her, the lack of individual freedom is not only a problem in Morocco, but in the whole Maghreb. She also added that Moroccan women have always been obliged to pursue a bottom-up approach and fight for their rights. The president of Africa Women's Forum insisted on a close monitoring of the

implementation of measures. This also means that from a bottom-up approach the organisation formulates recommendations for decision-makers while from the women's point of view it launches awareness campaigns to draw the attention of women to their basic rights.

The women's rights activist of the *Association Citoyenneté et Libertés* (ACL) also reinforced the importance of the bottom-up approach in shaping the question of gender equality. The priority of the NGO is to provide support to women who earn a living from handicraft items. In this sense, the activities of the organisation cover professional training for these women. The representative mentioned in the interview that ACL could reach more than 2000 families through its training project that also meant a kind of economic independence to these women. Women's rights organisations play a crucial role in the empowerment process of Southern Tunisian women through their awareness campaign and fieldwork during which they call the attention of women living in rural areas to the recognition of their rights. ACL believes that mobilisation in cyberspace cannot replace personal contacts. Having a general knowledge on the basic rights is a prerequisite to exercising pressure on decision makers. However, the representative also underlined that such efforts require good organisation, political will, and mainly financial matters, which all came up against difficulties in the current political and socioeconomic context.

In contrast, the *Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche sur le Développemen*t (AFTURD) believed that the creation of an international framework for women's rights (top-down approach) could trigger collaboration at the state and sub state levels. The second interviewee from AFTURD saw the bottom-up approach as a long process that requires caution.

According to the *Coalition ISRAR,* decision makers have limited scope to improve the conditions of women. On the one hand, there needs to be a willingness to take into account the demands of NGOs; on the other hand, the question of gender equality is not a priority in their agenda.

A quite different position was introduced by the independent Moroccan activist, the former delegate-minister for women conditions, family and children protection regarding the role of sub state actors in pushing decision-makers to act. Changes do not only require the inclusion of women, but men too. "The future Morocco is a Morocco

for men and women on the same path of equality". This view is similar to the position of the founder of *Amel Ghizen*. "Political willingness will only work with the active participation of sub state actors in the economic and political fields" (Feten G., personal communication, 3 August 2022), but the rule of law is indispensable for the successful cooperation between actors at the micro and mezzo level. It can also not be denied that the promotion of gender equality is often used for political purposes by decision-makers, especially in times of crisis. This transpired during the rule of President Bourguiba and Ben Ali. This fact was also reinforced by an interviewee from the *Association Patrimoine pour l'Economie Solidaire*, who viewed the nomination of women for political posts more like symbolic gestures than a real intention to change: "For me, the nomination of a woman as prime minister is more about communication than a true willingness to change" (Aida B.A., personal communication, 7 October 2021).

The Tunisian activist, member of the Women, Peace and Security Committee of the African Union and various Tunisian NGOs expressed a quite neutral position on the possibilities and limits of sub state actors in influencing decision-makers. "All depends on political willingness, no development can take place without any will" (Salua G., personal communication 20 May 2022). Since 2011 the foundation of NGOs is much easier than before and currently there are more than 1000 civil societies in Tunisia that pursue a kind of cooperation with decision-makers. However, the problem is the lack of vision, "there is no strategic vision for the country" (Salua G., personal communication 20 May 2022) and all this is due to the intervention of Western powers who work against the establishment of a solid democratic order in Tunisia.

Regarding the promotion of a bottom-up approach in ensuring gender equality, a quite pessimist point of view could be noticed in the case of *Association Jlij pour l'Environnement Marin (AJEM) Djerba* who rather highlighted individual cases and the pursuance of awareness campaigns on the spot. The first representative shared a personal story about a woman from Djerba. The activist drew attention to the importance of the enforcement of economic rights in guaranteeing economic independence when she was working as head of a project in Djerba. Since then, the aforementioned woman had succeeded in opening her own shop. The second representative of AJEM did not mention concrete solutions in pushing decision-makers

to act, but highlighted the importance of communication. In this regard, the association created different clubs that discusses solutions related to socioeconomic questions.

The quite pessimist point of view regarding the cooperation between sub state actors and decision-makers was also shared by the founder of *Amel Ghizen*, who mentioned that these days there is a lack of communication between actors at the micro and mezzo level. Due to a lack of confidence towards political leaders NGOs can better meet people's needs.

Tables 6 and 7 below provide a classification of interview questions and organisational responses:

Aspects	Morocco			
	HAF (3 activists)	La Voix de la Femme Amazigh	Without she I would never be a he	Coalition ISRAR
Impacts of the COVID-19 on women's rights	serious (adaption is possible)	serious (impoverish-ment of women)	serious (increase of domestic violence)	highlighting the vulnerability of women, digitalisation as a key
Intra-state and regional cooperation	will of cooperation international cooperation with the US → positive experiences	will of cooperation, but outbreak of the pandemic (belief in domestic cooperation)	will of cooperation (e.g., Tunisian and Mauritanian partners)	will of cooperation (e.g., Algerian, Mauritanian, Libyan and Tunisian NGOs + rural associations) →creation of working groups+ forums
Outcome of the pandemic	positive impact → need for complementary activities (workshops) → empowerment of women	negative impact → financial cut, termination of fieldwork and regional cooperation	negative impact → possibility to support women's economic independence as a key area	question of adaptation + financing = amelioration of the conditions of women
Barriers to gender equality	social, cultural, and traditional norms; lack of access to education, labour market, health services; lack of legal awareness	presence of laws in favour of men, regional and cultural inequalities, patriarchal society	cultural, political, glass-ceiling effect in the labour market	lack of monitoring, reliability of statistical data, lack of competence
Bottom-up approach	yes, establishment of local cooperatives, intensive training programs	yes, the key is political participation of women + local cooperation, local projects	depends on the current political context + economic independence+ political will	willingness does exist with decision-makers, but difficult

Aspects	Morocco			
	Association Ennakhil	Association Épanouissement Féminin	Africa Women's Forum	Independent (former delegate-minister, ex-ambassador)
Impacts of the COVID-19 on women's rights	serious (adaption, elaboration of strategies, extra time, socioeconomic)	serious (increase of violence by 30%, cut-back of activities)	serious (verbal and physical violence, multitasking)	serious (increase of violence, but rapid measures of the government and NGOs)
Intra-state and regional cooperation	generally positive (information exchange), but regional inequalities, limited organisational capacities	strong will of cooperation, but outbreak of the pandemic (only domestic cooperation)	generally positive, but moderate approach, need of networking, confidence building, capacity building, but limits of cooperation (poor telecommunication facilities)	quite divisive position, not always necessary → mobilisation, pressure, well-defined project are key elements
Outcome of the pandemic	increase of violence → elaboration of recommendations, new initiatives, mobilization, education, awareness campaigns	negative impact → financial cut-back, vulnerability	negative impact → financial-cutback, elaboration of alternative solutions, "challenges and initiatives", but more attention from the side of government	negative → increase of violence, vulnerability, women at risk (healthcare, agriculture), but alternatives (responsibility, tele-working, tele-learning)
Barriers to gender equality	cultural ("toxic masculinity"), public funding	cultural and political ("masochist culture")	education (high rate of illiteracy), child marriage, traditional, economic and religious	education (problems related to mentality), laws are not implemented (e.g. constitution)
Bottom-up approach	possible, but with awareness campaigns, lobbying + pressure	yes, typical in Morocco, lack of individual freedom → solution: lobbying, pressure + awareness campaigns	possible, monitoring of implementation, awareness campaign, elaboration of recommendations increased collaboration of NGOs	"men and women on the same path of equality", (inclusion of men!)

Table 6: Summary based on interviews with representatives and activists of Moroccan NGOs between the period of August and December 2021

Aspects	Tunisia				
	UNFT Kelibia	APES	AFTURD (2activists)	Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes	Association Citoyenneté et Libertés (ACL)
Impacts of the COVID-19 on women's rights	serious	serious (reinforcement of inequalities, increased domestic violence)	serious (impoverish-ment of women)	serious → economic and social marginalisation, violence in the political field	slow-up of the previous achievements, isolation of women, increase of violence
Intra-state and regional cooperation	will of cooperation Spanish support → positive experiences	pessimistic scenario → problems of financing, more confidence in a Northern-Southern cooperation	wider regional and international (French and Spanish NGOs) cooperation before the Arab Spring reinforcement of intra-state cooperation after 2011	strong, collaboration with women's rights NGOs since 2011 → bottom-up approach	regional cooperation following the Arab Spring, currently intra-state cooperation is preferred
Outcome of the pandemic	positive impact → intensive awareness campaign	negative impact → termination of seminars, cut in the financing	negative impact, but positive consequences for rural women → lower impact of the pandemic\n\n2nd activist: teleworking as a positive impact	negative impact →aggravation for women in vulnerable situation (private sector)	negative →impact on women making a livelihood from handicraft products
Barriers to gender equality	lack of job opportunities, limited access to decision-making, lack of self-confidence	social, economic, juridic, educational, political	need for change in mentality → heritage of the historical past\n\nunemployment of female graduates	need to eliminate economic and social inequalities as prerequisite to political empowerment	lack of knowledge about basic rights, absence of rights to culture and intellectual development + poor socioeconomic conditions
Bottom-up approach	_	rather pessimistic view depends on the political context	partly + importance of the international framework of women's rights (CEDAW) after 2011 bottom-up approach)	yes, strong intention is a must	willingness, crucial role of women's rights NGOs, but political will and financial substances are a must

Aspects	Tunisia		
	AJEM Djerba (2 activists)	Independent (member of the AU Women, Peace and Security Committee, different Tunisian NGOs)	Association Amel Ghizen
Impacts of the COVID-19 on women's rights	serious (social: increase of violence, degradation in education + labour market, presence in two fronts) + no fieldwork	serious (increase in violence, cut-back of financing)	generally controversial (no particular differences), independent from the pandemic
Intra-state and regional cooperation	positive, but rather domestic cooperation (regional ones are ad hoc) + collaboration with NGOs from the US, Europe, Algeria, Libya and Morocco	very positive → only guarantee, effectiveness + fieldwork and education (prerequisites to democracy)	positive (cooperation with local NGOs, providing tools for protection against the pandemic, helping people in need, e.g. illegal migrants)
Outcome of the pandemic	negative → serious socioeconomic, cultural (religious) consequences, but solidarity between NGOs	negative impact (mainly increase of violence, but before the pandemic problems of education)	neutral →inequalities depend on the mind set of people
Barriers to gender equality	education (school dropout, high illiteracy rate, propagation of Quranic schools, Ennahda!) + socioeconomic, mentality, lack of knowledge about rights + no communication	cultural (education has nothing to do with mentality) + religious increase of school dropout, Ennahda!)	economic dependency, but inequalities exist in Europe, too (depends on the mind set of people), no differentiation between men and women
Bottom-up approach	possible, capacity building, awareness campaigns on spot, guaranteeing economic independence + communication!	yes, with awareness campaigns + intense cooperation of NGOs	possible, but with a strong leader (a man can also do !)

Table 7: Summary based on interviews with representatives and activists of Tunisian NGOs between the period of January and August 2022

5.7. Evaluation

In general, responses of the different interviewees provided a comprehensive view on the conditions of women in Morocco and Tunisia, although no significant differences could be noted between the two countries analysed. It is important to underline that when it comes to emphasising special cases, projects or stories that brought about breakthroughs for women, activists were quite reluctant to talk about these achievements in detail, and only general information was communicated. In Morocco, the situation is more complex and is complemented by the cultural and ethnic division of the society, which gives a special strain to the question of gender equality. In Tunisia, interviews proved that solidarity between women's rights NGOs in the post-Arab Spring period, but mainly during the pandemic, were more decisive in Djerba than in other parts of the country, especially in the capital and the northern regions. Due to its geographical and ethnical characteristics, cooperation in Djerba was manifested in the creation of cooperatives that is also a common feature in some parts of Morocco (Atlas region).

According to the experiences drawn from the interviews, women's rights NGOs in these places would rather fill the position of government as local people are quite disappointed in the ineffective measures, or the lack of measures of decision-makers.

When referring to the theories applied at the micro level, the social movement theory emphasised changes in opportunities and the ability to mobilise great masses of society, a key to realising the goals of the organisation. Regarding feminist identity theory, general grievances will sooner or later lead from passive resistance to the stage of revelation. However, no changes can occur without the active role of women's rights NGOs who can exert pressure on decision-makers. In this regard, the outbreak of the pandemic was supposed to be a catalyst to shed light on the unequal conditions of women. However, as the analysis of the possible correlation between the inclusion of women in decision-making and the process of democratisation also revealed, the aggravation of the political and socioeconomic conditions overwrite the initial assumptions. Due to the poor socioeconomic, and current political conditions, the question of gender equality is evidently marginalised.

It is also important to underline that compared to Tunisia, the political system in Morocco has always left women's rights NGOs, space to mobilise and exert pressure on decision-makers. Therefore, if important changes in women's positions did happen, they were delayed. Compared to Morocco, apart from APES, women's rights activists in Tunisia were a bit more optimistic about bottom-up initiatives to improve women's social and economic conditions, they took quite an active role, including awareness campaigns on social networks, participation in different forums and organising workshops. This optimistic view and greater mobilisation of Tunisian women is in connection with the heritage of Bourguiba's state feminism, the measures that favoured Western-type modernisation, including the assurance of greater rights to women, and the proliferation of NGOs after the Arab Spring. The impact of the pandemic on the mobilisation of women's rights activists, created problems related to financing, and the cessation of workshops and conferences, limited the regional as well as local activities of women's rights NGOs. From the point of view of regional collaboration, the pandemic definitely reinforced cooperation among local organisations.

Except for UNFT and AFTURD in Tunisia, other women's rights organisations were established following the Arab Spring. APES and the Ligue des Électrices Tunisiennes activists viewed the political but mainly economic processes quite negatively since 2011. These are also demonstrated in women's limited access to basic healthcare services and political participation. Domestic violence, violence in the labour market and in the political field also remain key areas where urgent measures are a must and a prerequisite to the political empowerment of women.

It is also important to highlight that nearly all Moroccan and Tunisian women's rights activists emphasised the significant increase in domestic violence committed against women. Unfortunately, in most cases these atrocities remain unrevealed, whether it is because in more traditional societies abuse is still considered a shame, or, whether it is the lack of knowledge about basic rights and possibilities to act. In some cases, institutions do not provide effective or immediate protection for abused women. The absence of legal protection and competent bodies is a sign that the legal framework and apparatus have disintegrated, especially in Tunisia. Concerns related to the functioning of the government were also raised by Freedom House and resulted in the negative classification of Tunisia.

While in Tunisia, constraints to achieving gender equality mainly included those of economic origin, the lack of knowledge about basic rights and in some cases a rigid, conservative mentality. In Morocco the constraints were more social, cultural, or educational, deriving from the remnants of the patriarchal society. As Sadiqi emphasised, contrary to Tunisia, the Moroccan political establishment was built on a strongly tribal system, which made reforms impossible to carry out. The adoption of conservative family law (*Moudawana*) is a clear manifestation of the remnants of the patriarchal society (Sadiqi, 2008, pp. 449-450).

Related to the secular-religious discourse that was raised at the beginning of the dissertation as has been discussed, the realignment of power after the Arab Spring brought about the influence of the Islamists. While Ennahda communicated a modern approach regarding the role of religion and the position of women in society, in fact, the regression of gender equality was quite apparent in the educational system. The increase of school dropouts highlighted by AJEM Djeba and the independent Tunisian activist, member of the Women, Peace and Security Committee of the AU, was not the consequence of the pandemic, but could be explained by reasons deriving from cultural, mainly religious constraints.

Another important finding of the empirical part of the dissertation to mention is related to the cultural barriers to realising gender equality. The experience with women's rights NGOs in the traditional and remote community of Djerba was quite positive, the solidarity which characterises the inhabitants of the island was tangible in the case of women's rights NGOs, too. The researcher received prompt replies from them. It was quite interesting to see how activists in the small and isolated island put all their efforts into improving living conditions for people, especially for women. Solidarity measures included the creation of sport facilities, childcare services, advertising environmental awareness, or helping local producers and artisans sell their products in the market. All these specificities are visible when somebody happens to visit the island, full of artisanal products and helpful and friendly people.

In general, answers of women's rights activists showed that the question of gender equality is a bidirectional process in which the presence of some culturally established norms means an obstacle for women's rights NGOs and states alike, but in which both non-state actors and the international community can exert pressure on states to act. The

empirical findings also reinforced the fact that achieving progress is a long process that must include a strong will from non-state actors and decision makers alike. In case of the latter, a firm strategy is indispensable and a must to an equal treatment of social, economic, and political rights. However, given the actual political and socioeconomic situation, the resolution of these problems requires priority before the time bomb explodes.

CONCLUSION

The dissertation examined women's empowerment in Morocco and Tunisia as a complex topic. This required the analysis of the main processes that contributed to shaping gender patterns at the *macro*, *mezzo* and *micro* levels. The research questions included the role and responsibilities of decision-makers and non-state actors in the promotion of gender equality (*top-down or bottom-up approach*), the correlation between the political classification of Tunisia and Morocco and women's role in this process, and finally, the impact of the Arab Spring and the COVID-19 pandemic on the evolution of women's rights in the two countries.

The *macro level* (*international arena*) of the analysis provided an adequate framework for the dissertation through the description of those concepts (*requirements set in the CEDAW, follow-up of the Beijing Conference on Women, discrimination based on gender and social and economic marginalisation*) that constituted international norms to which decision-makers were required to adapt. In addition to these concepts, *institutionalised feminism,* or *state feminism* and *secular versus religious discourse* were also explained. The understanding of these concepts is of crucial importance to have a general view of gender inequalities in the Maghreb.

The research aimed to verify the hypothesis that the Maghreb region cannot be considered a monolithic bloc, therefore women's rights must be examined in the specific historical, political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics of Morocco and Tunisia. Secondly, based on the main findings of Ann Tickner and Cynthia Enloe, i.e. *gendered society,* the absence of women in the public sphere, it was claimed that the consolidation of male dominance in decision making not only exploited gender inequalities, but also reinforced them. Thirdly, the research stated that the evolution of women's rights is a bidirectional process, which depends on the actions and interactions of the leaders and non-state actors, is influenced by crises that can serve as catalysts to improve women's conditions.

With regard to the *first research question* and its sub questions that analysed those elements that played an important role in shaping women's rights at the macro, mezzo and micro levels in Morocco and Tunisia, and the relationship between these elements

and actors, the researcher summarises the main results as follows. *International conventions (CEDAW) and regulations adopted during follow-up conferences constituted the backbone at the macro level. Actors at the mezzo level included decision-makers, while sub state actors, such as founders and representatives of women's rights NGOs, women's rights activists and women of the analysed countries, all contributed to the shaping of gender equality. In addition to this, it cannot be neglected that external factors such as socioeconomic, cultural and political circumstances were also significant in the evolution of women's rights.*

While international agreements provided a strong framework for women's empowerment and elaborated main concepts and challenges, some states, including Morocco and Tunisia signed them only with reservations. At the macro-mezzo level one of the deficiencies of international conventions is the absence of a strong monitoring system and the advertisement of awareness about women's basic rights. These problems were also highlighted during the interviews. Referring to the first research question *the dissertation concluded that women's rights NGOs can exert a great pressure on decision-makers to change their policy (e.g. debates about drafting Tunisia's new constitution between 2011 and 2014), but within limits. Neither Tunisia nor Morocco has experienced democratisation, the political practices (centralisation of power), historical experiences are considered constraints to establishing a real democracy.* As the dissertation proved the democratisation process in Tunisia after the Arab Spring was blown by 2019. The Moroccan reforms of 2011 also proved to be more cosmetic than in-depth ones.

The *second research question* focused on the consequences of *gendered* domestic policy on the evolution of women's rights, the impact women can have on decision-makers and vice versa. The feminist IR and gender order theories clearly proved that international relations are strongly *gendered.* According to the findings of the research, so is the case with domestic policy-making. The traditional division of gender roles (women present in the private sphere, men in the public sphere) established a quite rigid system that is difficult to be overwritten.

In Morocco, the presence of a tribal system consolidated the patriarchal society, which was reinforced after the adoption of a conservative family law in 1957. The *Moudawana* consolidated the male-dominated attributions in the private sphere, as highlighted by

Tickner (1992) and Enloe (2000, 2016), and gave women no room to achieve significant changes in their conditions. The masculine character of the private sector was also reflected in the foreign policy making of the country where force, power, and aggression dominated.

Compared to Morocco, Tunisian women were in a more privileged position following the adoption of the progressive family law, the CSP. Such progress could not take place in Morocco even forty-eight years later with the reform of the *Moudawana*. However, these privileges provided to Tunisian women were the result of an enforced top-down approach that clearly cut back bottom-up initiatives of women's rights NGOs in the country. For Tunisian women, a quality change only became a reality in the post-Arab Spring period, while in Morocco women's rights NGOs have been active since the 1970s and were obliged to fight to bring about significant improvements for women that were not taken for granted.

Based on the analysis of the functioning of the government and the interviews, *the dissertation found that the absence of responsibility from the leadership leads to general disappointment among local people towards decision-makers. This anarchical situation reinforces the recognition of women's rights NGOs that in some regions quasi fill the position of the government.*

While a strong initiative and collaboration from sub state actors would result in the transformation of the traditional division of gender roles, meaning that women can infiltrate into the public sphere, historical experiences in Tunisia showed that the evolution of women's rights has always taken place in a strongly controlled manner (*institutionalised or state feminism*). As has been underlined, in Morocco the centralisation of power did no leave women much space to quit the private sphere. The support of Moroccan and Tunisian leadership for gender equality also serves as a tool to showcase to the international community, and leaders often use women's rights as a political card to play against their opponents. In Tunisia, this scenario took place after 1956, which is understood through the lens of the secular versus religious division, and which also reappeared following the Arab Spring. Here, the conclusion can refer back to Waylen's findings (2010) about the *institutionalisation of gender* and that the presence of women in decision-making is rather apparent to maintain the image of gender equality.

Concerning the *last research question* about the short and long-term consequences of the Arab Spring and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic on the continuous transformation of gender roles in society and on the level of decision-making, the dissertation sought to examine *to what extent sub state actors can influence state behaviour*. The research supposed that crises in general would encourage women's rights activists and NGOs to pursue a more active cooperation. Although previous studies built on the analysis of the impact of state behaviour on gender inequalities, the shaping of gender roles at the *micro level* (*individuals, non-state actors*) was identified as a research gap. In this regard, the researcher contacted ten Moroccan representatives and ten Tunisian activists to ask them about the roles women's rights NGOs can play in the promotion of gender equality and the overwriting of the traditionally state-centric order. Although the complex interdependence theory of Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane confirmed the growing influence of sub state entities from the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s and their role of crucial importance in the resolution of cross-border problems, *the research showed that states remain the most important actors in international relations. This was also the case in Morocco and Tunisia, where everything was subordinated to the governments' enforced modernisation process following the declaration of independence from France in 1956*.

From the point of women's rights NGOs in shaping the attitude of political leaders the application of social movement and feminist identity theories proved that arriving at the last stage of the development of identity (i.e. the stage of revelation) is quite a long process. However, women's rights NGOs can play a significant role in mobilising people. Although social movement theory helps to better understand those factors that played a crucial role in the formation of women's rights movements, it does not take into account the cultural specificities of the countries analysed. To address this gap, the dissertation also analysed the evolution of women's rights in secular versus religious discourse.

Concerning the impact of crises on the mobilisation of women's rights NGOs it is without doubt that the pandemic placed the question of women's empowerment at the centre. Lessons learned from the Arab Spring demonstrated that crises could pave the way for different NGOs to mobilise for the benefit of vulnerable groups, which can contribute to achieving significant positive social development. The pandemic could also lead to a better understanding of women's rights, as states are pushed to rethink

how social peace can be preserved. However, in the long run, this conclusion must be considered with caution.

The Arab Spring and the pandemic established a favourable environment for civil society to play a more active role and exert pressure on decision-makers. However, the socioeconomic conditions (political turmoil in Tunisia, foreign indebtedness, the increase in the unemployment rate) overwrote initial expectations and the bottom-up approach was blown in the shade. Moreover, the Arab Spring brought about the re-emergence of Islamists, the consequences of which were most apparent from the point of women's rights in Tunisia where school dropouts significantly increased.

Regarding the construction and reconstruction of gender norms *interviews as an important result proved that the evolution of women's rights in Morocco and Tunisia does not depend on traditions and cultural norms but on the level of education. This result was also reinforced by statistical data, and also explains why Tunisia has always been ahead of Morocco in terms of the development of women's rights.*

Another important finding that excludes cultural norms being a sole barrier to achieving gender equality is that contrary to the general perception, interviews proved that solidarity among women's rights NGOs is more apparent in the marginalised regions of Morocco and Tunisia.

All things considered, *empirical findings reinforced the fact that achieving progress is a long process and it must include continuous support from sub state actors and decision-makers while also taking into account the political, economic and social actualities that can overwrite the priority of guaranteeing gender equality. Therefore, a clear strategy for the equal treatment of women's social, economic, and political rights is a must.*

To conclude the main findings of the dissertation the researcher aimed at testifying a theory about how different actors and circumstances influence the stance on women. In order to achieve this, applying deductive method, the researcher examined previous theories at each level of analysis. Following the empirical testing, induction enabled the researcher to set up a theory that stated socioeconomic and political factors and the role of religion are key in the shaping of women's rights. The inherent deficiencies of the political establishment of the analysed countries (infiltration of male-dominated norms) will continue being the biggest constraint to gender equality, cultural norms and the

level of education are independent factors when examining how gender equality evolves.

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APPENDIX

Questions asked of the representatives of Tunisian and Moroccan women's rights NGOs

1. To what extent did the pandemic situation affect the main objective/objectives of your organisation? What are/were the main challenges to cope with for the future?

2. Besides the negative impacts of the pandemic on women's empowerment, according to you how can the post-COVID period lead to the amelioration of certain conditions for young women and women in general? Or do you believe that the pandemic will reinforce the already existing inequalities?

3. How do you see the cooperation with other NGOs in the field of education? In this regard, how do you see the prospects of collaboration among other associations that represent the same objectives?

4. How can regional cooperation among associations with the same objectives be an impetus to achieving gender equality?

5. How do you see the process of the construction and reconstruction of women's identity before the events of 2011, immediately after it and in light of the COVID and post-COVID period?

6. What do you see the biggest burden in realising gender equality?

7. How do you cope with the presence of traditional practices and norms when working on realising the main objectives of your organisation?

8. To what extent, and in which manner, can your organisation contribute to ameliorating women's empowerment in your country?

9. Please name some success stories among those women you support or supported, and who achieved a high position in the political or economic field (e.g., entrepreneurs)?

10. To what extent did your organisation succeed in eliminating illiteracy during its operation?

11. Do you believe by realising your main objectives you can overwrite the existing traditional norms and practices that create a burden in achieving gender equality?

12. To what extent can your organisation have an impact, or what impact can your organisation have on decision makers? How can it influence decision makers and the field of policymaking in a world traditionally dominated by men?

13. How can your organisation succeed in rewriting socially and culturally created burdens that hinder achieving gender equality?

14. How can women contribute to the process of democratisation?

15. According to you, how can the gender gap between men and women be reduced?

16. How can society have a great impact on/what kind of impact can it have on decision makers and NGOs?