

**The Internet as a Tool for Feminist Development in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia**

by

**Taylor Lueck Mulcahey**

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2016

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH  
DIETRICH SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This thesis was presented

by

Taylor Lueck Mulcahey

It was defended on

November 21, 2016

and approved by

Dr. Frayda Cohen, Senior Lecturer, Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies

Dr. Meredith Guthrie, Lecturer, Department of Communications

Dr. Radhika Gajjala, Professor, School of Media and Communications,

Bowling Green State University

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Luke Peterson, Lecturer, Department of History and Global Studies

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Taylor Lueck Mulcahey

University of Pittsburgh, 2016

This project analyzes the role of the internet in the development of grassroots feminism in Tunisia following the 2011 revolution that toppled the longstanding regime, and sparked a wave of protest throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Following the collapse of the regime, and its program of state feminism, Tunisian women had the opportunity to develop new forms of grassroots feminism, and they did so using a variety of tools, including the internet. The internet is free, and widely accessible, and it offers new ways of facilitating social movements. It is changing the way that women react to sexism and oppression in their societies, and is therefore becoming a key piece in contemporary feminist development, as was the case in Tunisia. In order to understand how Tunisian women are utilizing this tool, I conducted an in-depth analysis of three online entities, including the blog A Tunisian Girl, the Chaml Collective, and the topless images of Amina Sboui. Through online ethnography and cultural visual analysis, I discovered that there were a number of development methods that these entities held in common. Each source utilized the internet to create transnational feminist connections and promote feminine agency, and through their ability to affect offline spaces, they each challenged the idea that the online social movements are ineffective. I also found that the type of entity is important, as different sources were better suited to achieve specific goals, including the use of images in order to quickly share a message across diverse online platforms, and Chaml's use of Facebook to facilitate discussions. My research into the specific use of these online entities to aid in the

development of a grassroots feminist movement in Tunisia contributes to a growing body of scholarship on the intersection of online and offline spaces, and the role of new technologies in the development and facilitation of social movements, including contemporary feminism.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This project would not have been possible without the help and support of many people. I would like to thank Dr. Luke Peterson for his critical role in the development and facilitation of the project, and constant support in the process. I would also like to thank Dr. Frayda Cohen, Dr. Meredith Guthrie, and Dr. Radhika Gajjala for their interest, feedback, and willingness to answer questions along the way. I would also like to thank Dr. Mounir Khelifa, and all my friends, instructors, and colleagues in Tunisia. Finally, I would like to thank Yossra Esseghir and the women of Chaml for their willingness to help with the project, Bradley Hanlon for answering all my frantic questions, and my family, John, Kristi, Alanna and Brogan, for talking me through the most stressful days and offering their endless support.



## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

My study analyzes the role of the internet in post-revolutionary, Tunisian feminism. Tunisia has a long history of state-sponsored feminism, which began as early as their independence from France in 1956. Under this system, the government granted women many progressive rights, but women themselves were largely absent from these movements. In December 2010, following the self-immolation of a street vendor in central Tunisia, the country erupted in protest. Weeks later, after continuous unrest, Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country, symbolizing the fall of the regime. The system of state feminism upon which women relied for their rights collapsed as well. For the first time in their history, Tunisian women had to develop their own feminist model, independent of the state.

My study focuses on the role of the internet in crafting a grassroots feminist movement after the Tunisian revolution. The internet offers new ways of facilitating the growth of social movements and has changed the ways women are responding to sexism. In this project I explore how these possibilities are affecting online spaces in Tunisia, and their influence on offline feminist development.

In order to explore online Tunisian feminism, I analyze three separate online sources: the blog *A Tunisian Girl* by Lina Ben Mhenni, the Chaml Collective, and two topless images of Tunisian activist Amina Sboui. The following sections will introduce the project by providing necessary background information on the internet as a source of feminist inquiry, as well as the

position it holds in Tunisian society. These sections are followed by a large section that investigates the history of women in Tunisia, specifically in relationship to the powerful state-sponsored feminist movement. This history is necessary in order to understand the position in which women found themselves in 2011 when the state collapsed. The final section includes a brief overview of the methodology and ethical considerations of the study, before engaging in an analysis of each online source.

## 1.1 INTERNET AS A SOURCE OF FEMINIST INQUIRY

In 2014 Elliot Roger shot and killed six students at the University of Santa Barbara, leaving thirteen others wounded. Roger left numerous warnings online before engaging in his violent killing spree, including YouTube videos and a long manifesto that explained his intense hatred of women after years of rejection.<sup>1</sup> The incident was extreme, but many women felt that Roger's ideas stemmed from harmful ideologies prevalent in society, which mirror violent acts that occur on a much smaller scale. Many feminists find these claims to be derailed by men's claims that not all men are violent. In response, Twitter user Soraya Chemaly tweeted, "#NotAllMen practice violence against women but #YesAllWomen live with the threat of male violence. Every. Single. Day. All over the world."<sup>2</sup> The hashtag #YesAllWomen spread all over Twitter, and women used it to detail the ways that they fear and react to threats of violence from men on a regular basis. In just a couple days, it was used over a million times, and the numbers steadily rose in the days and weeks following Roger's mass shooting. The people who engaged in the

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<sup>1</sup> Emanuella Grinberg, "Why #YesAllWomen Took off on Twitter," *CNN*, May 27, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/27/living/california-killer-hashtag-yesallwomen/>.

<sup>2</sup> Soraya Chemaly, Twitter post, May 24, 2014, 5:47 p.m., <https://goo.gl/SIEb74>

discussion ranged from regular college students and mothers to popular celebrities, journalists, and vocal feminist icons. The online campaign received coverage from the largest media outlets and sparked a national conversation about violence against women, one that was dominated by the stories of women themselves. In her piece for *The New Yorker*, Sasha Weiss stated, “#YesAllWomen is the vibrant revenge of women who have been gagged and silenced.”<sup>3</sup>

I became engrossed in the campaign, reading other women’s tweets and blog posts, and posted about my own experiences with online harassment. I began to realize that the internet has become a crucial element of feminist activism. The #YesAllWomen Twitter campaign is one of many online campaigns focused on feminist issues, and it exemplifies the ability of online media to change the way that women respond to sexism. The internet has become an important part of feminism in the twenty-first century, and it is something that we, as feminist students and researchers, need to explore.

To analyze online feminism, and the way that scholars have studied the interaction of women and the internet, it is import to briefly explore the origins of the web and early scholarship surrounding its inception. The internet originated as a tool to be used by the United States military in the 1960s. Inspired by the work of a scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the RAND Corporation worked closely with the Pentagon’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) to create a network of supercomputers,<sup>4</sup> successfully linking four of them together in 1969. It was originally created as a mechanism to defend information and preserve communication in the case of a nuclear attack, but it became something much larger. From here, networks continued to spread and develop, first amongst those working in

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<sup>3</sup> Sasha Weiss, “The Power of #YesAllWomen,” *The New Yorker*, May 24, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-power-of-yesallwomen>.

<sup>4</sup> Dalia Al Nimr, *Cyberfeminism in the Arab World* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG, 2009), 5.

security, and soon after, amongst colleges and universities. Moving beyond its roots in the military, the internet officially got its title in 1989, and it became host to large numbers of companies and organizations in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>5</sup> The term is now ubiquitous. Connections have become wireless and personal, and more and more people have become linked almost continuously to the internet. As the internet has expanded, its origins in the nationalist, masculine, American institution of the US military led to biases in who used the internet and were included in the industry. Men dominated the production of computer technologies, and were more prevalent online. As a result of these developments, the internet was viewed as inherently masculine.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than accepting the view that technology created by men can only benefit men, women began exploring its potential for themselves. Sadie Plant published her book, *Zeros and Ones*, in 1997 as a response to claims of male domination. In the book she applies a metaphor that uses programming's binary language to represent the possibilities for gender in the digital age. According to Plant, zeros represent the feminine, while the more phallic ones represent the masculine. She ultimately predicts that the future of digital technology is feminine, or in her language, the zeros will replace the ones as the powerhouse of the binary system.<sup>7</sup> Plant suggests that women are better equipped for internet technology, and will therefore use this technology for both political advancement, and to overcome traditional gender roles.<sup>8</sup> Feminist scholar Susan Hawthorne claims that Plant's optimism closely resembles Shulamith Firestone's radical view in the 1970s that advances in reproductive technology would ultimately relieve women of

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Jessie Daniels, "Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, Adn Embodiment," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1 & 2 (2009), 104.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein, "Cyberfeminism: Introduction," in *Cyberfeminism: Connectivity, Critique and Creativity*, ed. Susan Hawthorne and Renate Klein (North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press, 1999), 3.

the burden of childbirth.<sup>9</sup> Firestone's revolutionary view has not yet been realized, just as the internet did not eliminate rigid and oppressive gender regimes. This pattern reemerges in feminist discourse as women overestimate the possibilities of new technology. Both Firestone and Plant assume changes to be inherent in the technology itself. In many ways, these optimistic views can be understood as backlash against the common belief that technology is inherently masculine, most likely stemming from the male-dominance of the field. Plant's project can be understood as an attempt to destroy this idea.

This convergence of web technologies with the rhetoric of feminism became known as cyberfeminism. Although Plant's claims might be dismissed as utopian, she was a crucial voice adding to a conversation about the subversive and oppositional potential of the internet. The movement itself began in the early 1990s in Australia, and its focus was primarily on the ways that new technologies could be used to empower women and support the feminist cause.<sup>10</sup> Many scholars were weary of the utopian view that Plant suggests, and drew attention to the existing power structures online. Wilding rebukes utopian concepts, stating, "It is of utmost importance to recognize that the new media exist within a social framework that is already established in its practices and embedded in economic, political, and cultural environments that are deeply sexist and racist."<sup>11</sup> These critiques pushed cyberfeminism beyond its utopian origins, and scholars began to ask more complicated questions about the intersection of gender with class, race,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Al Nimr, *Cyberfeminism in the Arab World*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Faith Wilding, "Where Is the Feminism in Cyberfeminism," *Old Boys Network*, accessed October 14, 2016, [http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith\\_def.html](http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith_def.html).

religion, and national identity online,<sup>12</sup> while keeping the goals of feminism at the forefront of these discussions.

The theory of cyberfeminism has become stratified, and there are many scholars like Jessie Daniels who argue that there are both problems and potential for women using web technologies. Daniels describes cyberfeminism as neither “a single theory nor a feminist movement with a clearly articulated political agenda,” but instead as “a range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture.”<sup>13</sup> Cyberfeminism bridges many different fields of study, including sociology, political science, women and gender studies, sexuality studies, and many more. As such, and as Hawthorne and Klein point out, the diverse approaches and analyses of feminists are replicated by cyberfeminists.<sup>14</sup>

Out of this diverse group of theorists, academics, journalists, and activists comes a range of theories and rhetoric that are useful for understanding the intersection of feminism and the internet. This theoretical heritage has informed my research and will be visible throughout, but it has also given my project justification, as many others are asking themselves similar questions about the manifestation of women online. I understand the internet to be a nuanced form of technology that offers both positive and negative potential for women. In fact, in many ways, the internet mimics sexism seen offline through the replication gendered power relations and the reiteration women in traditional roles. However, it also offers new possibilities to participate in feminism, and an exploration of these prospects forms the basis of my study.

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<sup>12</sup> Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh, “Cyberfeminism 2.0: Where Have All the Cyberfeminists Gone?,” in *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, ed. Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2012), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Daniels, “Rethinking Cyberfeminism(s): Race, Gender, Adn Embodiment,” 102.

<sup>14</sup> Hawthorne and Klein, “Cyberfeminism: Introduction,” 2.

Rather than examining the internet as a complex technology that offers women entirely new ways of being, I understand it as a new type of space that women inhabit in complex ways. For example, Yeon Ju Oh produces a cyberfeminist analysis of Unnine, an online webzine created in Korea.<sup>15</sup> In her analysis, she points that many internet sites use spatial metaphors, such as “chat room,” “information superhighway” or even the term “online community” itself. However, Oh suggests that these terms do not remain metaphorical to the people who use and inhabit them, but she argues that they are indeed tangible, and they “provide the sense of being there without physical encounters.”<sup>16</sup> The assumption that there is a certain reality to online spaces leads to the conclusion that online communities are just as authentic as offline communities, and can thus be understood in similar ways.

For many people, online interactions have just as many real consequences as offline interactions. Netnographer Robert Kozinets describes the effects of online interactions: “We can learn new words, new terms, new techniques, new products, new answers, new ideas. We will encounter genuine concerns, genuine needs, genuine people.”<sup>17</sup> These interactions are indeed meaningful, and are an integral part of people’s social lives. They have real effects that spill over into offline interactions. This is not to suggest that the internet is a replica of offline spaces, but rather that it can be interpreted in similar ways. The internet offers unique tools and methods for connecting and interacting with others, but the effects on individuals are real and tangible. Through the internet, men and women are able to enter into and experience different spaces, communities, cultures, and ideas from their personal computer or mobile device. Through these

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<sup>15</sup> Yeon Ju Oh, “Is Your Space Safe? Cyberfeminist Movement for Space Online at Unnine,” in *Cyberfeminism 2.0*, ed. Radhika Gajjala and Yeon Ju Oh (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2012), 245.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>17</sup> Robert V Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2015), 17.

spatial interactions, users experience tangible changes, create real knowledge, and form meaningful relationships, many times in ways that would be impossible to achieve offline.

Feminists in the United States, like those that began the #YesAllWomen hashtag, have used the internet in a variety of different ways, demonstrating the greatest aspect of the internet: that it does not limit itself to one context. During my fieldwork in Tunis, the political and cultural capital of Tunisia, I discovered that, although the mechanisms for online feminism are replicated abroad, the popular conceptions regarding the internet were unique. The internet was censored in Tunisia for many years, until the revolution in 2011, which affects Tunisians' relationship to the internet by augmenting its meaningfulness and it offers a relatively new platform for analyzing the role of the internet in feminist development. Through conversations with Tunisian citizens, especially those who played a role in Tunisia's revolution, I realized that Tunisia's relationship to the web is entirely different than the United States.

To understand the unique position the internet represents for Tunisian women, it is imperative to explore Tunisia's history of web technology. Although censorship was common, Tunisia remained at the forefront of the internet's expansion, and in 2005, hosted the World Summit on Information Society. Tunisia's former president, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali took the stage to give the opening remarks: "We have concentrated our efforts on building a modern and developed society, through a project of reform based on enlarging the scope of individual and public freedoms, promoting relevant legislation, reinforcing the democratic practice, [and] protecting human rights."<sup>18</sup> The International Federation of Human Rights (IFHR) published a report in response to the choice of Tunisia as host. The report described methods of limiting journalistic freedoms and outlines Tunisia's duplicitous position on information technology, one

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<sup>18</sup> Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, "Statement from the President of the Republic of Tunisia" (speech, Second Phase of World Summit on Information Society, Tunis, Tunisia, November 16-18, 2005).



that simultaneously worked to develop web-based technologies, while controlling use of the internet. The IFHR discovered there were several hundred workers in Tunisia dedicated solely to censoring internet usage.<sup>19</sup> However, the government's censorship was not limited to the web, and also affected many different aspects of the lives of Tunisian citizens. Reporters Without Borders ranked Tunisia as 164<sup>th</sup> out of 174 countries in terms of press freedom, citing, for example, that the regime or ruling party directly supported four out of eight daily newspapers.<sup>20</sup> Journalists that criticized the regime were punished through various means, including the confiscation of their passport, police brutality, torture, arrest, or in extreme cases, even death.<sup>21</sup> Ben Ali's speech, and even the decision for Tunisia to host the event, was ironic considering the country supported one of the most advanced systems of media censorship.

Tunisian citizens grew unhappy and began to look for ways to protest the regime and create new narratives which led to the formation of a deep attachment to web-based technologies in Tunisia. The World Summit on Information Technology, as well as Ben Ali's dedication to the expansion of the web, ultimately welcomed the technologies that contributed to a growing online community of dissent. Blogging became a popular form of expression and a way to provide counter narratives to those of the regime.

Sami Ben Gharbia founded one of Tunisia's largest online blogging platforms, *Nawaat*, in 2004. In an interview, Ben Gharbia described his inspiration, "When I saw the internet for the first time, I thought, 'this is the tool and the means that could be used as a medium to counter propaganda of the regime.' So I started *Nawaat* with friends of mine to provide a platform and a

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<sup>19</sup> International Federation for Human Rights, *International Fact-Finding Mission: Tunisia and the World Summit on Information Society*, Paris: 2005, <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/tn418a.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Reporters Without Borders, *Press Freedom Index 2010*, 2010, <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2010,1034.html>.

<sup>21</sup> International Federation for Human Rights, *International Fact-Finding Mission*, 10.

space for debates.”<sup>22</sup> *Nawaat*’s main purpose, in the early years, was to publish everything that the dominant forms of media were leaving out. Another blogger, Henda Chennaoui has been operating a personal blog since the early 2000s. She described her motivation, stating, “There was, at all times and in every subject, a single vision and a single opinion... [Blogging] is a chance to say, ‘No, I think differently.’”<sup>23</sup> The government responded by increasing their censorship techniques, especially their censorship of the web. However, this only increased the ardor of Tunisians dedicated to providing an alternative narrative. In 2002 Zouhair Yahyaoui was arrested for posting anti-regime sentiments to his blog, after which he was tortured for eighteen months in prison. Yahyaoui died in 2005 from a heart attack, an event that blogger Aya Chebbi described as being responsible for the creation of Tunisia's first martyr for internet freedom.<sup>24</sup> The long battle against oppression was hard-fought by Tunisian citizens who wanted freedom from the regime, and as a result, it held an important place in Tunisian consciousness, becoming symbolic of their fight for freedom

Following the revolution in early 2011,<sup>25</sup> the internet opened up and censorship ended with the regime. Tunisians won a battle against oppression, and the free and unrestricted internet was one symbol of their success. Inspired by the events in Tunisia and throughout the rest of the Middle East, the United Nations recently filed a report in which they recommend all governments grant free and uncensored access to the internet in support of freedom. After fighting so long for this right, Tunisians support this association with fervor. Their access to the internet is a reminder of the success of the revolution, and a right that was not easily acquired,

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<sup>22</sup> Sami Ben Gharbia, interview with author, Tunis, November 26, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Henda Chennaoui, interview with author, Tunis, November 26, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Aya Chebbi, interview with author, Tunis, December 3, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> On December 17, 2010, a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in the small, Tunisian town, Sidi Bouzid, after police confiscated the goods he was selling. This sparked widespread unrest as protests against the regime broke out all over Tunisia. On January 14, 2011, President Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia, marking the end of his rule. This history will be explored in greater depth in a later section.

which places it in a highly valued and interesting location for exploration and inquiry. The fact that unrestricted access to the internet is so new offers a great way to explore online feminism from a perspective that would be impossible to access in other contexts. The type of grassroots feminism emerging in Tunisia, and its iteration online, converge to create a space to analyze the formation of grassroots feminist expression and the role of online feminism.

## **1.2 HISTORY OF WOMEN IN TUNISIA**

Given the previous exploration of the origins of the internet, and its application in Tunisian society, the following section provides more context by examining the role of women in Tunisia, and is broken up into three separate eras. The first section analyzes the role of women from colonization, through independence, and under the rule of their first president Habib Bourguiba. The second will examine women under the regime of Tunisia's second president, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, and the third will explore the role of women in the 2011 revolution, and the period immediately following the collapse of the old regime. The purpose of this section is to give background of the Tunisian feminist movement and women's complex relationship with the Tunisian state, while understanding the critical role women have played throughout history. It is imperative to analyze this history in order to understand the status of women in Tunisia today.

### **1.2.1 Women from colonialism to Bourguiba**

The history of the Tunisian woman is one of progression and modernity, hard battles, and tough critics. While members of elite communities, voices of authority, and media outlets have

debated, romanticized or condemned Tunisian women for years, the voices of Tunisian women have often been absent from the conversation. The advancement of Tunisian women's rights has served to fulfill men's social and political objectives. Political leaders have advocated for and granted many progressive rights to women, but they did this for reasons that served to bolster the strength and authority of centralized male powers. The history of women in Tunisia, particularly thorough a lens of political cooptation, drives us to understand their dependency on a centralized state, and will ultimately explain what happened in 2011 when this state fell.

French interest in North Africa began in 1799, when Napoleon landed in Alexandria, but the French did not turn their sights towards Tunisia until the mid-nineteenth century, at which point Tunisia was under Ottoman rule.<sup>26</sup> The Ottoman governor had borrowed money to enact numerous reforms, which put the country into increasingly greater debt, making them vulnerable to French encroachment. France occupied neighboring Algeria in 1830, and their influence grew steadily in the years that followed. In 1881 French forces marched across Algeria border and declared Tunisia a French protectorate.<sup>27</sup> At the onset of colonization, the French sought to apply language in order "to render morally justifiable its project of undermining or eradicating the cultures of colonized peoples."<sup>28</sup> As they entered into these new spaces, colonists justified their actions by creating an Other that they must conquer in order to put an end to backwardness. European colonial projects in the Middle East and North Africa found Islam to be the perfect symbol for backwardness. Within the colonial project's condemnation of Islam, women became

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<sup>26</sup> To say the history of the Tunisian woman has a beginning is a reductionist claim, but this analysis begins with the onset of French colonization.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Gasiorowski, David E. Long, and Bernard Reich, eds., *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa*, 7th ed. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2014), 475-476.

<sup>28</sup> Leila Ahmed, "The Discourse of the Veil," in *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 151.

the centerpiece of anti-Islamic, colonial discussions.<sup>29</sup> According to Leila Ahmed, colonialism began around the same time that feminist discourses were emerging throughout Europe, and men coopted the language of feminism, and used it to justify their colonial project.<sup>30</sup> For many years, women have been used as a means to measure a society's modernization using arbitrary regulations, and practices such as veiling became a visual expression of the backwardness of Muslim societies. European men created a discourse based upon the idea that "Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the general and comprehensive backwardness of Islamic societies."<sup>31</sup> Once colonizers had determined a vocabulary and discourse with which to establish backwardness, they were able to morally justify colonizing these societies, to liberate the Muslim woman.

The French colonial movement supported duplicitous ideologies on women, and although colonizers claimed priority of women's liberation in Muslim societies, they rejected the rights of women in their home countries. The oppositional position of colonizers towards women's liberation is best exemplified through the actions of Lord Cromer of Britain, whose actions in Egypt stood in direct contrast with his actions at home. Although he openly advocated for the liberation of Egyptian women from backwards societies and corrupt men, he remained an active leader in the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage in Britain.<sup>32</sup> The language of feminism was a tool in the colonial project, not a moral mission of the colonists. Elite men saw an opportunity to capitalize on the emergence of feminist discourse to serve their political goals, not considering the equality or dignity of women themselves.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 151-152.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 153.

This language proved successful, and by 1881, Tunisia had become a French protectorate. By the early twentieth century, a new face had arrived on the scene, one that would pave the way for great improvements to the status of Tunisian women's rights. Tahar al-Haddad, a religious scholar at Tunisia's prestigious Zitouna Mosque, published the book *Our Women in the Shari'a and Society*, in 1930, which was a revolutionary reinterpretation of the Qur'an,<sup>33</sup> examining the position of women, and how they fit into Islam.<sup>34</sup> Al-Haddad criticized many unjust practices that discriminated against women, including the right of a man to divorce without reason, women's unequal share of inheritance, and the lack of education for women, among others. He claimed that these practices were against the practice of Islam itself, and called for the emancipation of Tunisian women through Islam. Ultimately, "Haddad affirmed that religion is innocent of the oft-made accusations that it is an obstacle in the way of modernity. According to Haddad, Islam is a source of progress."<sup>35</sup>

Following the publication of his book, the Zitouna Mosque revoked his degree, and issued a fatwa against him. They accused him of heresy and forced him out of society and into extreme poverty. He was isolated, and died of a heart attack just five years later<sup>36</sup> demonstrating the consequences that resulted from criticizing the mainstream practice of Islam. Although he did not live to see it, his approach, the reinterpretation of the Qur'an, made a huge contribution to Islamic feminist thought. Like some of his radical contemporaries, such as Habiba Al-Menshari who publically unveiled in 1929,<sup>37</sup> al-Haddad articulated a firm stance against veiling. He argued that the veil is not a signifier of Tunisian identity, nor is it a guardian against morality. Instead,

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<sup>33</sup> The Qu'an is the holy book of Islam.

<sup>34</sup> Lamia Ben Youssef Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), 97.

<sup>35</sup> Amel Grami, "Gender Equality in Tunisia," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 4 (2008): 350, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2045516>, 350.

<sup>36</sup> Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman*, 97.

<sup>37</sup> Grami, "Gender Equality in Tunisia," 350.

al-Haddad suggested that the veil was a tool used to suppress women and keep them separated from public life.<sup>38</sup>

Al-Haddad made radical claims in support of Tunisian women's rights, and writes against violence and abuse, but he does not call for equality. He still emphasized tradition, and claimed that the role of women is as mother and wife. He supported the idea that the man is head of the household, and the woman is there to support him and raise the children. But he argues that education is necessary for women to do this effectively.<sup>39</sup>

Al-Haddad's contribution cannot be overstated, as he is one of the most well known, early scholars that worked for women's rights. He paved the way for new thinkers, and in the years leading up to independence, there was a surge in women's political involvement. "The nationalist movement for independence was a good opportunity for women to enter into the public sphere, and they took it,"<sup>40</sup> writes Khedija Arfaoui. Some women chose to take a radical stance, but many women supported traditional roles within the family. Although these women were able to contribute to the nationalist cause, they were not able to succeed in many of their feminist ventures due to conservative backlash, especially from religious leaders.<sup>41</sup>

Another key figure emerged during this time of nationalist struggle, Habib Bourguiba. Educated in Tunisia and in France, Bourguiba participated in Tunisian politics under colonialist rule, and worked hard for independence. Bourguiba was a member of the nationalist Old Destour party in the late 1920s before he split and became the leader of the Neo Destour party in 1934.<sup>42</sup>

Al-Haddad and other early Tunisian feminists brought discussions of feminism to the forefront

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<sup>38</sup> Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman*, 100.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 106.

<sup>40</sup> Khedija Arfaoui, "The Development of the Feminist Movement in Tunisia 1920s-2000s," *International Journal of the Humanities* 4, no. 8 (2007): accessed February 28, 2016, 53.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>42</sup> Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman*, 97.

of the political scene, and as a result, Bourguiba added his own opinions in 1929 after the debate over the veil received a lot of attention. Bourguiba supported the veil as a piece of Tunisian identity.<sup>43</sup> In this way, Bourguiba acted in much the same way as early colonizers. He used the visual representation of women as a pawn in the search for national identity and a tool for independence. As Mounira Charrad states, “Treating Islamic family law as a sign of distinctiveness from the French colonizer, most Tunisian nationalists of the earlier period agreed that reforms should be postponed until they could be made a sovereign state.”<sup>44</sup> Women’s rights, at this stage, were not a priority. Rather, women were a useful channel through which Bourguiba and other nationalists could establish distance between themselves and France. Women were to be the guardians of tradition, and the veil was a convenient way to demonstrate this.

Tunisia gained its independence from France on March 20, 1956. Bourguiba became president, and he immediately enacted the Personal Status Code (PSC), which took effect August 13, 1956, before the constitution was even written.<sup>45</sup> It reformed family law, and granted women many progressive rights. To name a few reforms, under the PSC, polygamy and repudiation were banned; women had the right to divorce, a legal age for marriage was established, and women earned the right to custody in certain situations. Bourguiba, following in the tradition of al-Haddad, rooted many arguments in support of the PSC in the ideals of Islam.<sup>46</sup> Conservatives were unhappy about the enactment of the PSC, but Bourguiba had the power and national support to ignore them. These were the same conservatives that cried out against women speaking on behalf of their own advancement years earlier. Rather than being silenced by these conservative voices, like women had been in the past, Bourguiba dismissed them. Women were

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>44</sup> Arfaoui, “The Development of the Feminist Movement in Tunisia 1920s-2000s,” 55.

<sup>45</sup> Grami, “Gender Equality in Tunisia,” 350.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 351-352.



unable to campaign for their own liberation, but a powerful male, had the privilege to make changes on their behalf.

The PSC revolutionized women's positions, and Tunisia has remained the country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in which women have the most rights for many years. However, its enactment was not supported by any feminist movement, but rather controlled entirely by Bourguiba and other male political elites.<sup>47</sup> This began Tunisia's system of state feminism and political patriarchy. State feminism, according to Amira Mhadhbi is a system in which "the 'feminist' state takes on the championing of women's rights and promotion of gender equality via legislative and executive mechanisms... it is supposed that there is no need for a feminist movement to exist in opposition to the state."<sup>48</sup> Women, though in many ways emancipated from the oppressive practices of the old family order, became largely dependent on Bourguiba and his regime, which granted them all of their rights. Their independence was illusionary, and in reality, the male authority in their life did not disappear but became Bourguiba himself.

Following independence, Bourguiba completely reversed his position on the veil, stating that it served no religious purpose.<sup>49</sup> He went a step farther, and used the visual representation of the Tunisian woman to construct a new Tunisian identity. He invoked Tunisia's Phoenician and Roman heritage to create an identity that was uniquely Tunisian. He claimed that the veil was simply an artifact brought by Arab invaders, and therefore suggests that Tunisian women should not veil.<sup>50</sup> Now that veiling no longer served the purpose of supporting independence, Bourguiba

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 350.

<sup>48</sup> Amira Mhadhbi, "State feminism in Tunisia: reading between the lines," *openDemocracy*, November 7, 2012, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/amira-mhadhbi/state-feminism-in-tunisia-reading-between-lines>.

<sup>49</sup> Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman*, 103.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 118.

saw a way to use women's appearance in nation building, because unveiled women signal modernity. "It is the privileges of gender, education, and, in Bourguiba's case, class that allow these two nationalist figures [Bourguiba and al-Haddad] to speak on behalf of the "Tunisian Woman" and to claim for her a traditional past and modern future."<sup>51</sup> Bourguiba, like the colonizers before him, had merged the ideas of gender and culture into one concept from which he exploited the appearance of Tunisian women to define their identity in order to support his political goals. In doing so, he not only defined the identity of the nation's women, but of country itself.

Bourguiba's cooptation of women's rights and emancipation did not stop there. He unilaterally created the *Union National des Femmes Tunisiennes* (UNFT) shortly following independence. The UNFT was the only women's organization allowed to operate, and it was entirely under the jurisdiction of Bourguiba and the Neo-Destour party. The UNFT became the arm of the government that worked to achieve Bourguiba's political goals under the semblance of female-led feminism. Bourguiba did not believe women have an equal place in politics, and in one post-independence speech, he stated, "When we reestablish the woman's rights... we don't make her man's equal in all fields. We acknowledge, however, her equal right to dignity."<sup>52</sup> The UNFT was the only place for women in the government, a place of subordination in which Tunisian women were to become the pawns of male government officials.

Many other reforms that Bourguiba framed as being central to the development of women's dignity and rights, actually served a different purpose. For instance, Tunisia has long supported women's right to work, but this stems from economic necessity rather than ideology. Tunisia had to develop other sectors by engaging a large labor market. Leaving out half the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 116.

population was not economically viable,<sup>53</sup> so the state had to make it morally acceptable for women to work.

Bourguiba also became a major advocate for girls' education, claiming that education is the best way to protect a girl's virtue. He also offered up police and security forces to protect women from being harassed.<sup>54</sup> Although the effects of these measures were beneficial to women, the discourse he used to describe these measures underscores his position as guardian or protector, another facet of the political patriarchy he designed with himself as the head.

In 1987, Bourguiba's autocratic rule came to an end when Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali took power. Bourguiba died years later, and was buried in his hometown of Monastir in a self-designed mausoleum with the words "Liberator of women, builder of modern Tunisia" on the door. He left behind a complicated legacy. He achieved many great victories in support of women's progress, and many continue to laud him for these achievements. However, he did so at the expense of women's liberation by using these reforms to bolster his position leader and advance his own agenda.

President Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali followed in the footsteps of those before him, and continued to use women as the pawns in his political games. Though he continued to modernize, in 2011, this system of state feminism would fall with the entire regime, and women would be left scrambling to redefine themselves in new roles independent from the state.

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<sup>53</sup> Elhum Haghghat-Sardellini, *Women in the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 121.

<sup>54</sup> Zayzafoon, *The Production of the Muslim Woman*, 123.

### 1.2.2 Women and the Ben Ali Regime

While Bourguiba was beloved among Tunisians,<sup>55</sup> and was largely held in high regard for his role in their independence and the political and social developments he brought to the country, he grew senile in the latter years of his presidency. During this time, many Tunisians became dissatisfied with him, especially amidst growing violence between his regime and a growing Islamist movement. In 1987, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali took over as President in a nonviolent constitutional coup.<sup>56</sup> Tunisians were relieved by the change, and their hopes were augmented by the promises of Ben Ali himself. Growing economic instability, threats from political Islam, and high levels of state control had soured the latter years of Bourguiba's rule, but Ben Ali offered possibilities for transformation, and many Tunisians hoped for a focus on liberalization of the economy and moves towards increased democratization.<sup>57</sup> In the early years of Ben Ali's presidency, many of these goals were realized.

The changes made by Ben Ali's regime in the early years had major effects on Tunisia's women. He influenced the feminist movement directly by allowing for the foundation of two autonomous women's organizations, the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD) and the Tunisian Democratic Women's Organization (ATFD), which had developed over the course of the 1980s. ATFD was the result of a group of young women who were dissatisfied with the dominance of the UNFT in feminist discourse. They met at the Tahar Haddad Cultural Club in Tunis, where they discussed the shortcomings of the regime's domination of the feminist system, and they sought new ways to challenge and overcome their

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<sup>55</sup> Through conversations, during my time spent in Tunisia, it was clear to me that Tunisians still hold their first president in high regard.

<sup>56</sup> Gasiorowski, Long, and Reich, eds., *Government and Politics*, 479-480.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 177.

inferior status.<sup>58</sup> When Ben Ali formally recognized the group in 1989, they took their formal name as ATFD. At the same time, Ben Ali also recognized AFTURD, a group that focused on activist research about women.<sup>59</sup>

Once these organizations received recognition from the regime, there was nothing stopping other women's organizations from stepping out onto the political scene. The pluralization of women's organizations allowed more women to participate in politics, but it was not without cost. Official recognition, and the support from institutions within the government brought with them a loss of independence. ATFD had been managing with complete autonomy, now had to operate within the constraints of the state.<sup>60</sup> They had traded their autonomy for a limited political voice.

Shortly after Bourguiba's replacement, Ben Ali responded to demands from an Islamist-oriented group to change the PSC by signing the National Pact. Ben Ali invited members from different organizations to sign the pact, which indicated that the state would defend the PSC. ATFD signed even before they were formally recognized as a feminist organization. While the rhetoric of the National Pact was undoubtedly supported by these feminist organizations, the ceremonial signing of the National Pact was a symbolic indication that they would be granted political power contingent on their support for the goals and processes of the state.<sup>61</sup> In her work on Tunisian development, scholar Emma C. Murphy states, "One can view the fragmentation of the representation of women's interests as having still maintained the corporatist relationship

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<sup>58</sup> Arfaoui, "The Development of the Feminist Movement in Tunisia 1920s-2000s," 57.

<sup>59</sup> Lilia Labidi, "The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women's Associations in the Maghreb: The Case of AFTURD and ATFD in Tunisia," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 3, no. 1 (2007): 15.

<sup>60</sup> Emma C Murphy, "Women in Tunisia: Between State Feminism and Economic Reform," in *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy and Society*, ed. Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Marsha Pripstein Posusney (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2003), 176.

<sup>61</sup> Labidi, "The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women's Associations in the Maghreb: The Case of AFTURD and ATFD in Tunisia," 7, 15.

between the state and interest groups, since the new associations exist not to challenge government policy but to contribute to it.”<sup>62</sup> According to her analysis, these organizations did not earn true autonomy. Rather, they were able to set their agendas and address topics of concern, but they were never able to oppose the state without consequences.<sup>63</sup>

Ben Ali’s recognition of these two organizations so early in his career as president set a precedent that he would walk in the footsteps of his predecessor by supporting the advancement of women. But Tunisia’s liberal history was not the only influence on his decision. External forces, most notably the United Nations Decade for Women, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),<sup>64</sup> and the NGO Conference on Women in Beijing,<sup>65</sup> made women’s issues an important priority. The international focus on women’s rights gave Bourguiba, and then Ben Ali, the opportunity to demonstrate to the world how progressive and liberal their country was. Preoccupied with development and modernization and striving for the support and respect of western governments, these were critical opportunities of which each man took full advantage.

Regardless of the motivations, the first decade of Ben Ali’s time in office ushered a number of progressive changes that advanced the position of Tunisian women. These included the establishment of new governmental positions dedicated to women, the criminalization of domestic violence, alimony and child support for divorced women, and a visible attempt at encouraging women into government positions.<sup>66</sup> His attempts at liberalizing the economy proved successful as well. Industries expanded, the tourism sector increased, and society

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<sup>62</sup> Murphy, “Women in Tunisia: Between State Feminism and Economic Reform” 178.

<sup>63</sup> Mhadhbi, “State Feminism in Tunisia: Reading between the Lines.”

<sup>64</sup> Arfaoui, “The Development of the Feminist Movement in Tunisia 1920s-2000s,” 57.

<sup>65</sup> Murphy, “Women in Tunisia: Between State Feminism and Economic Reform,” 180.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 179-180.

urbanized. As a result, policymakers and employers could not ignore the productive capacity of women in favor of traditional ideas about employment, and there were more opportunities for women to join the workforce and contribute to their economy.<sup>67</sup> However, Murphy suggests that economic liberalization can have detrimental effects for women. During the era of economic liberalization in Tunisia, she highlights trends of laying women off due to their lower positions in companies, an increase in temporary jobs that often hire women but lack protection and stability, and limitations on social programs that aid women as household managers and those responsible for children.<sup>68</sup> While Murphy suggests there is reason to believe these effects are possible, she also concedes that there is not enough information to prove whether this was entirely the case. There were, however, more visible effects of the liberalization process on women, including the effect it had on mentalities.

It was not until this era of Ben Ali's regime and economic liberalization that men really felt their position of relative authority being threatened. More women entered the workforce, and as they did so, the family structure changed. Women spent more time outside of the house, and as a result, they expected men to spend more time helping with household duties. However, men expected their positions vis-à-vis the private sphere to remain unchanged. They were shocked that the liberalization process was disrupting the status quo, especially within the one place that had since remained untouched by the state's decisions – their private lives.<sup>69</sup> Many men did not know how to handle these changing structures in their own home. They felt anxiety over the loss of their role as breadwinners for their families, and were threatened by the idea that women were now competing for their jobs, which were hard to acquire in difficult economic times. They felt

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<sup>67</sup> Grami, "Gender Equality in Tunisia," 355.

<sup>68</sup> Murphy, "Women in Tunisia: Between State Feminism and Economic Reform," 183-4.

<sup>69</sup> Grami, "Gender Equality in Tunisia," 355-356.

their jobs being threatened by an increasingly more competitive market economy, and a larger workforce, but they also felt their position in society threatened as well: “The majority of men want to preserve their traditional gender roles,” states Amel Grami, “They believe that they lost their power and their exclusive role as breadwinners.”<sup>70</sup> It is important to understand that the economy was rapidly changing, and that women were not the cause of economic hardships. The 1980s was a decade wrought with economic unrest that was not limited to Tunisia, but affected the entire region. As is typical of times of economic unrest, the response from citizens was reactionary, but not necessarily grounded in fact. Men saw an increasing number of women in the workforce at the same time that they experienced economic hardship. It is no doubt that these ideas became intertwined. The social structures that they were most comfortable with and relied upon had broken down, and there was a pervading sense of anxiety that manifested itself in anti-feminist rhetoric and behavior.<sup>71</sup> Liberalization also led to an increasingly stratified society, in which lower and middle classes felt left out of advancements, including a growing consumer culture. This created “a resentment that equates economic liberalization with the enforced importation of alien cultural values... The reaction to this is to retreat into the indigenous culture.”<sup>72</sup> Not only did a push for traditional values come from gender-based anxiety, but also from class-based anxiety. Both men and women blamed new policies for their economic hardships. Because liberalization is often linked to foreign ideologies, notably western democracies, the reaction from those suffering was to go back to the old status quo, one that they understood and felt they could control.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 355.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 355.

<sup>72</sup> Murphy, “Women in Tunisia: Between State Feminism and Economic Reform,” 185.



An infatuation with the status quo led to another major movement during the regime of Ben Ali: religious fundamentalism. The effects of the fundamentalist movement on women are twofold: they inspired traditionalist beliefs and rhetoric that harmed and belittled women's place in society. The effects also justified an increased authoritarianism by Ben Ali's regime that once again established women as a yardstick to measure society and justified increased measures to monitor and control women's actions.

Ennahda is the most important fundamentalist organization in Tunisian history, and has played a role in politics since its founding in 1981 up through the present.<sup>73</sup> Ennahda's emergence in the late 1970s, and formal organization in the early 1980s, can be understood in a number of different ways, but the rapid liberalization and modernization during the period likely played a major role. The above paragraph discussed gender-based and class-based anxiety over liberalization, and there is undoubtedly a link between this anxiety and growing support for Ennahda. According to Murphy, "[Tunisian political Islam] does express the anomie and alienation that result from rapid social modernization based on essentially imported social values. Ghannouchi represents the desire to find a culturally authentic path to social modernization."<sup>74</sup> Rachid Ghannouchi was the head of Ennahda at the time, and he stressed anti-west rhetoric and pushed for a return to more authentic values born out of Tunisia's Islamic history, rather than those that were imported. For years, under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali, Islamists lived in complete oppression. Ghannouchi believed that the secularist beliefs of both presidents undermined Tunisia's cultural history and created an inauthentic society and

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<sup>73</sup> There were, in the 1970s and 1980s, two other major Islamist groups, the Da'wa and the Progressive Islamists. Each group holds a slightly different ideology, but for the purpose of this study, discussion will be limited to Ennahda due to the fact that their influence has been much larger and they play a much more significant role in Tunisian history.

<sup>74</sup> Murphy, "Women in Tunisia: Between State Feminism and Economic Reform," 189.

inauthentic forms of modernization. Those dissatisfied and disproportionately affected by modernization contributed to a growing number of people who supported Ennahda's ideas, and there is no doubt that many people believed in a stronger Islamic presence and had no way of expressing it under the repressive, secular regimes. Ennahda's resurgence into the public sphere made this expression possible. While Ghannouchi did not push for women's total oppression like they experienced in the past, he and his party did believe that women had a specific place in society that was not equal to the position reserved for men. Women's main role was to remain in the home and look over the household and children, and they could step outside this at times as long as their household duties were not abandoned, and they did not strive for the positions of men. Ghannouchi encouraged women to liberate themselves from capitalism and western ideologies that were being propagated by Ben Ali's regime.<sup>75</sup>

The rise of Islamist parties that gained popular support in Tunisia sparked damaging rhetoric for women, but it also led to an increasingly authoritarian state under Ben Ali as he overstepped many political boundaries in an attempt to defend the country against what he viewed as a regressive threat. The state began cracking down, specifically against anyone who demonstrated any possible affiliation with Islamists. What began as a means to control Ennahda, which Ben Ali viewed as a major threat to his power, soon escalated. Ben Ali began to use more and more oppressive measures against groups he did not like, including torture and unchecked incarcerations.<sup>76</sup>

Although religious fundamentalism is often regarded as a threat to women, to view this era through that lens alone would do women a great disservice. The reality is that Islamists and Ben Ali's regime both used women for their own political purposes, equally harming women's

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 190-191.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 188.

status in their society. Women's physical appearances were once again used as yardsticks to measure society's success, although Ghannouchi and Ben Ali differed entirely on what they interpreted success to be. They each considered women's appearances, most importantly whether women were wearing the hijab or not, as a signifier of the overall condition of the state. Whether or not the hijab is being worn in public is a symbol of whether the government is successfully keeping fundamentalism at bay, or whether Ennahda is successfully infiltrating Tunisian society. Ghannouchi states that women have an "innate nature as a guardian of the heritage of mankind,"<sup>77</sup> an ideology that closely resembles that of Bouguiba and other modernizers in the fight for Tunisia's independence. Ben Ali views women in a similar manner, from the opposite side of the ideological perspective. By enlisting women's organizations to join with his regime and sign the National Pact, Ben Ali demonstrates that women are both indications of modernization, and the key to safeguarding his modernist vision for Tunisia. To him, they are "protectors of the state."<sup>78</sup> These men left women in the middle of an ideological proxy war, fought on the battlefield of women's bodies.

The growing Islamist movement had a detrimental effect on society, and threatened women's social and political positions, many of which had only recently been gained. Men, faced with anxiety over women taking their positions as heads of households or competing for their jobs, had a rhetoric that they could use to oppose women's advancement. Family relations worsened as the fundamentalist movement gained traction.<sup>79</sup> Familial relationships have a large effect on society, and declining gender equality in the home often translates to declining gender equality in the public sphere.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>78</sup> Labidi, "The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women's Associations in the Maghreb: The Case of AFTURD and ATFD in Tunisia," 2.

<sup>79</sup> Grami, "Gender Equality in Tunisia," 355.

During this time, as women's identities once again became an ideological battleground, the autonomous women's organizations that emerged under Ben Ali remained mostly silent. The reasons for this are rather straightforward. To begin, these organizations had very limited membership. As problems for women first started to emerge under Ben Ali's liberalization, the only voices present to oppose him were those of a relatively privileged group. The women that participated in these organizations were upwardly mobile,<sup>80</sup> most likely upper or middle class, and they were bilingual or trilingual, attesting to their elite and educated status,<sup>81</sup> and most likely urban residence. These women did not represent Tunisian women as a whole, and could not effectively stand up for the needs of low-income women or women in the rural regions who would definitely feel the adverse effects of economic liberalization and religious fundamentalism. When Ennahda entered the scene and began contributing to the problems women were facing, Ben Ali's regime became increasingly more authoritarian, with little tolerance for people who did not agree with them. Women in these autonomous women's organizations actually lacked significant autonomy at all. They could maneuver within the guidelines of Ben Ali's regime, but the reality is that they were still highly restricted, and did not have any real power to critique the status of women in the country.

Ben Ali's regime continued to grow more authoritarian as time went on, and the threat of Ennahda and other Islamist groups failed to dissolve. The consequence for women was that there was very little to be done. Organizations of all types were struggling to make any changes under Ben Ali's authoritarianism. He silenced any thoughts or ideas that contradicted his own, and used his wife, Leila Ben Ali, as the ideal image of the modern Tunisian woman. She was the leader of

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<sup>80</sup> Murphy, "Women in Tunisia: Between State Feminism and Economic Reform," 178.

<sup>81</sup> Labidi, "The Nature of Transnational Alliances in Women's Associations in the Maghreb: The Case of AFTURD and ATFD in Tunisia," 16.

the Arab Women's Organization and presided over national and international events surrounding women's rights. According to Andrea Khalil, "the ministry under Ben Ali centered its celebration of Women's Day (13 August) around Leila Trabelsi [Ben Ali], instead of being a celebration of all women or certain outstanding female citizens,"<sup>82</sup> Leila hosted the event and received awards on behalf of all Tunisian women. Using her as a symbol erased the possibilities and potential differences among Tunisian women, most notably religious women who could not identify with her secular identity. However, for the remainder of the time that Ben Ali held power, the image he projected to the country, and to the rest of the world, was that of Leila Ben Ali as *la femme Tunisienne*.

By the late 2000s, women remained second-class citizens. Although they made some essential legal gains early on in Ben Ali's time as president, they did not take root in society, and mentalities remained very traditional. Besides lacking any true, autonomous voice in government, women also faced problems that were not related to legislation, but norms in their society. For instance, cafes remained almost exclusively male, women faced harassment when walking down the street, men still expected women to do the majority of household work regardless of their employment status, young women were almost never allowed to live alone,<sup>83</sup> and family structures relied heavily on the man as head. No matter what legal gains women achieved during the time of Ben Ali, the real battle was the mentality of citizens, which saw little progress over the span of two decades. "The gap remains large between the legal framework and the lived reality on the one hand, and between law and mentalities on the other," said Grami.<sup>84</sup> The hopeful start to Ben Ali's presidency slowly came to an end as it became clear that the legal

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<sup>82</sup> Andrea Khalil, "Tunisia's Women: Partners in Revolution," *Journal of North African Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 186–99, doi:10.1080/13629387.2013.870424, 192.

<sup>83</sup> Murphy, "Women in Tunisia: Between State Feminism and Economic Reform," 182-183.

<sup>84</sup> Grami, "Gender Equality in Tunisia," 356.

reforms he boasted about to the country, and to the rest of the world, did not truly improve women's lives.

### 1.2.3 Women and the Jasmine Revolution

Ben Ali's regime showed no signs of letting up. His violent and authoritarian methods increased, controlling virtually all aspects of society. Signs of displeasure became widespread throughout the population, but very few people were able to express their discontent for fear of punishment. Ben Ali arrested, imprisoned, and tortured journalists, Islamists, and even bloggers.<sup>85</sup>

Fed up with the oppression, on December 10, 2010 a young street vendor named Mohammed Bouazizi immolated himself on the steps of the town hall in Sidi Bouzid in central Tunisia. He died days later, becoming a martyr of what would come to be known as the Jasmine Revolution.<sup>86</sup> After years of struggle under the regime, and motivated by the violent death of Bouazizi, Tunisians from all over the country took to the streets in protest. During these protests, identities were forgotten as men and women shouted in unison the slogan of the revolution, "Dignity, social justice, liberty and democracy!"<sup>87</sup> There were very few divisions among protesters; they were all Tunisian citizens, united by seeking freedom from a cruel regime. Khalil explores the equalizing nature of crowds using structuralist theory, stating, "The deconstructive dynamics of crowds explains the power to move beyond gendered hierarchies in moments of

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<sup>85</sup> International Fact-finding Mission and Information Society, "International Fact-Finding Mission Tunisia and the World Summit on Information Society," no. May (2005).

<sup>86</sup> Mabrouka M'Barek, "Enough with the 'Jasmine Revolution' Narrative: Tunisians Demand Dignity," *Middle East Eye*, April 18, 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Mounir Khelifa, "Tunisian Revolution I: *Origins*" (lecture, School of International Training, Sidi Bousaïd, Tunisia, September 7, 2015).

social progress and collective liberalism.”<sup>88</sup> For a brief moment during these protests, men and women were equal in Tunisian society.

The protesters’ efforts were a success, and on January 14, 2011, Ben Ali officially stepped down from his position as president and fled to Saudi Arabia. When he left, the public sphere erupted,<sup>89</sup> and a plethora of voices struggled to be heard. Tunisians knew what government they wanted to take down, but soon realized it is much harder to build a government from the bottom up. The equality that citizens felt on the streets dimmed rapidly, however, as Tunisians were forced to grapple with their expectations for the new government. Women especially had to decide what they wanted to see from new leadership. After years of having their role in society defined by a single leader, the freedom resulting from the revolution created endless possibilities, and revealed problems for Tunisian women that could not be expressed under the old regime. Blogger and activist Henda Chennaoui was very active during the revolution, protesting on the streets and blogging about the events. She comments on the problems with women’s newfound freedom, stating,

Before the revolution, the public space was confiscated by the system, so we couldn’t really feel the temperature in the public space, especially regarding women. We couldn’t really see if women were modern or not, or how people perceived women. After January 14, we discovered that the image of women and their status were not as we thought they were; for instance, modern, the most liberated woman in the Arab world, independent, intelligent, and beautiful. We realized that there is a lot of discrimination and resentment towards women in the public space, in politics and in everything.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Khalil, “Tunisia’s Women: Partners in Revolution,” 188.

<sup>89</sup> Mounira Charrad and Amina Zarrugh, “Equal or Complementary? Women in the New Tunisian Constitution after the Arab Spring,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 230–43, doi:10.1080/13629387.2013.857276, 232.

<sup>90</sup> Chennaoui, interview with author.

As Chennaoui describes, women discovered the hostile mentalities that many Tunisians harbored, and realized that these could pose a real threat to women's rights as a new government was being formed.

Although the old regime tried to preserve their leadership, Tunisians were not satisfied, and government officials and members of civil society soon decided that they would draft a new constitution and create a government that was entirely new. However, staring at a blank slate, and faced with the task of state building, Tunisians returned to the identity crisis they faced back in the 1950s when they became independent. It is common for governments to use the image of women as signifiers of their political goals,<sup>91</sup> and this time was no different. When Tunisia gained independence from France, Bouguiba used the modern, secular woman as an image to demonstrate his dedication to a modern, secular state, and as a means to separate his political project from the tribal politics of the time. In much the same way, in 2011 women once again became the image on which to project Tunisia's vision for their political future. Khalil explains that "the formative process and imagination of the new, post-Ben Ali nation is debated in many instances through the question of women's role in society and on images of women as symbolic of national consolidation."<sup>92</sup> Women became entrapped in a battle, notably one between secular and Islamist forces. They were once again the battleground upon which these opposing ideologies fought over national identity. However, this time, women's place was no longer dependent upon the decision of a controlling, secular leader, but on a newly formed democracy.

The first task to decide Tunisia's post-revolutionary future was to draft a new constitution. They elected a National Constituent Assembly (NCA) in October 2011, using a system of gender parity, in which party lists had to alternate between men and women. The

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<sup>91</sup> Khalil, "Tunisia's Women: Partners in Revolution," 191.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 191.



recognition of women during this election was crucial, especially when considering Valentine Moghadam's research, which argues that women's participation in transitional governments and the formation of democracy is a key indicator of whether or not the resulting government will be supportive of women's interests.<sup>93</sup> Women held 24% percent of the seats in the resulting NCA,<sup>94</sup> and the Islamist Ennahda party, which many modern, urban women viewed as a threat to their rights, had the highest number of female-held seats. The percentage of women represented is relatively high, just below the UN threshold of 30% parliamentary representation in order to influence policy. It was also important that Islamist women, most notably women associated with Ennahda were given a voice because they were dually silenced under Ben Ali's regime, first for their gender, then for their outward expression of their religion.<sup>95</sup>

The issue was that this high representation appears progressive and inclusive, but there were so many underlying problems with the system that women really had much less influence than these numbers suggest. The visible women in the NCA actually replicated the decorative nature of visible women that was characteristic of Bouguiba and Ben Ali's state feminism. The women involved in the NCA were not very diverse. Although they represented a number of different ideologies, and the inclusion of Ennahda women was a step up from representation in the past, they were still mainly middle to upper class, educated, urban women. These are what Moghadam terms "modernizing" women.<sup>96</sup> Poor and uneducated women, notably those in the regions outside Tunis, were not represented, and neither were their interests. Their lack of representation damages the principles of democracy, and hinders the possibility of success

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<sup>93</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, "Modernising Women and Democratisation after the Arab Spring," *The Journal of North African Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 137–42, doi:10.1080/13629387.2013.875755, 141.

<sup>94</sup> Khalil, "Tunisia's Women: Partners in Revolution," 193.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

<sup>96</sup> Moghadam, "Modernising Women and Democratisation after the Arab Spring," 139.

because rural women played a key role in the ignition and perpetuation of the revolution itself. In order for their work to prove successful, they need the government to realize their needs. Furthermore, just because women were given seats in the NCA, this did not guarantee that their voices were heard. In an interview conducted by Khalil of Boshra BelHaj Hamida, the former president of ATFD stated, “The egos of political actors have never been bigger, and there is a sense that women are additional and unwanted rivals in the political field.”<sup>97</sup> Although there were no official measures to ensure women’s lack of participation, men utilized unofficial methods to silence women’s voices. Omezzine Khelifa was an active civil society member during Ben Ali’s regime, and she was encouraged and inspired to run for office after the revolution. However, Khelifa describes high levels of harassment for women politicians, and a culture of domination by politicians of the old regime, almost entirely men. There was little potential to actually make change, said Khelifa, because new ideas were simply ignored by the male leadership.<sup>98</sup> While women were present, their influence was limited, and men dominated the political task of state building in formal contexts such as the NCA.

Women’s power was concentrated in informal settings after the revolution, a process that Mounira M Charrad and Amina Zarrugh have termed “politics from below.”<sup>99</sup> These two authors uphold the birth of grassroots political influence as one of the most important developments for Tunisian women after the revolution. This can easily be understood in the context of Article 28 of the Tunisian constitution, which inspired large-scale protest and public debate throughout Tunisian society. In the draft of the constitution that was released in August 2012, Article 28

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<sup>97</sup> Khalil, “Tunisia’s Women: Partners in Revolution,” 195.

<sup>98</sup> Omezzine Khelifa, (lecture, School of International Training, Sidi Bousaïd, Tunisia, September, 2015).

<sup>99</sup> Charrad and Zarrugh, “Equal or Complementary? Women in the New Tunisian Constitution after the Arab Spring,” 232.

explicitly defined women's role in society as *complementary*, rather than *equal* to that of men.<sup>100</sup> Immediately upon its release, a public debate broke out. On August 12, 2012, following the release of the draft, over six thousand women met to protest in Tunis. Some women were affiliated with women's organizations, but there were also women attending the protest independently. The crowd was diverse, representing women from different classes and geographical locations, and the signs women held in protest were in both French and Arabic.<sup>101</sup> Women, and their male allies, also used the internet to raise awareness and oppose the article. One female politician, Selma Mabrouk, wrote a viral Facebook post, the hashtag #complementarité trended on Twitter in Tunisia, and nearly 30,000 people signed an online petition calling for the removal of the phrase.<sup>102</sup> The final draft of the constitution that was signed into law on January 27, 2014,<sup>103</sup> omitted the phrase altogether, a major victory for the women who opposed it. It is important to note that some women, especially those in the Ennhada party, supported the phrase 'complementary,' so the grassroots protest did not represent the interests of all of Tunisian women. However, the very fact that a phrase in one of the most important documents in Tunisian history entered into public debate attests to the advent and power of politics from below.<sup>104</sup> After spending decades under the control of autocrats such as Bourguiba and Ben Ali, who acted on behalf of women without consulting them, the fact that women could create such a large policy change independent of any top-down structure demonstrated new possibilities for women in a public sphere that once excluded them entirely.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 234-235. (my emphasis)

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 236.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 238.

<sup>103</sup> "Tunisia Signs New Constitution into Law," *Al Jazeera*, January 27, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/01/tunisia-assembly-approves-new-constitution-201412622480531861.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Charrad and Zarrugh, "Equal or Complementary? Women in the New Tunisian Constitution after the Arab Spring," 236.

Although this was a huge victory for Tunisian women, creating a grassroots feminist movement remained a challenging task. Following an introduction to my research project and methodologies, I will analyze the formation of this movement, and the specific ways that the internet is used to facilitate its development.

### 1.3 METHODOLOGY AND ETHICS

The internet offers new opportunities for researchers, and has led to the development of new methods of study and analysis. Social network analysis and web content analysis have become popular methods of study for researchers across a variety of fields including sociology, communications and marketing.<sup>105</sup> Researchers apply these methods in order to analyze online texts and the formation and application of online connections, relying heavily on big data sets. These methods were not suitable to my research question, because although they provide useful statistics on internet usage, they do not provide an in-depth look at how internet usage actually benefits offline spaces, and why people choose to use online entities. Understanding the motivations behind Tunisian online feminism and the practical application of the internet as a tool to bolster a grassroots movement required a different methodology. I wanted to use a qualitative methodology that allowed me to get an in-depth look at online entities while considering the offline, cultural context in which they occur. Rather than examining large data sets, I decided to narrow my research to include individual case studies. I chose three, separate,

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<sup>105</sup> John Postill and Sarah Pink, "Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web," *Media International Australia* 145, no. 1 (2012), 3.

online entities<sup>106</sup> that I examined in order to explore their operation as tools for grassroots feminism, and the effects of these tools on offline feminist development. Because these entities occur online in different ways, I could not standardize the methodology across each source. Instead, I chose two separate methods, including online ethnography and cultural visual analysis, which shift, based on which source is being examined. The specific application of these methodological practices will be explored later, as an introduction to the analysis of each source.

The project consists of a case study of three separate internet entities: the blog *A Tunisian Girl* by Lina Ben Mhenni, the Chaml Collective, and the topless image of Amina Sboui, also known as Amina Tyler,<sup>107</sup> from the radical feminist organization Femen. In 2011, Lina Ben Mhenni was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her blog, *A Tunisian Girl*,<sup>108</sup> making it one of the most influential woman-led online spaces today. Mhenni is a self-proclaimed feminist, and earned international recognition for her role in the 2011 Tunisian revolution and subsequent nomination. Her recognition both nationally and internationally, as well as her activism on behalf of democracy and women, make her an integral piece of the Tunisian feminist movement, specifically its manifestation online. The second case study is on the Chaml Collective,<sup>109</sup> a group that I became familiar with during my time in Tunisia after working with some of the members. The collective, created in 2014, consists of a closed Facebook group, a Facebook page and a corresponding blog, each with a relatively small following. As of October 2016, they had just over 3,000 likes on their page, and 57 members in the closed group. Although they do not have a large following, Chaml's online spaces are very active, and they focus specifically on

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<sup>106</sup> The term entities will be used to describe the diverse internet sites that I will examine during this project including blogs, a Facebook page, a Facebook group, and online images.

<sup>107</sup> Due to controversy surrounding her, she is very well known in Tunisia. Many people refer to her simply by her first name, Amina, and will henceforth be referred to as such.

<sup>108</sup> Yasmine Ryan, "Tunisian Blogger Becomes Nobel Prize Nominee," *Al Jazeera*, October 21, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/10/2011106222117687872.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Henceforth referred to as Chaml or the collective.

open discussions to “deconstruct the myth of ‘the Tunisian woman’”<sup>110</sup> and form a grassroots version of Tunisian feminism. Chaml offers an opportunity to explore the role of social media in post-revolution Tunisian feminism; therefore, my research focuses mainly on their Facebook activities, and is supplemented with information from their blog. The final case study is of two topless photographs that Amina posted to her personal Facebook page in March 2013.<sup>111</sup> In the first image she had “My body is mine and not the source of anybody’s honor” written across her chest in Arabic, and in the second, “Fuck your morals,” written in English. At the time, Amina was an active member of Femen, a radical feminist group that Ukrainian women founded in Kiev in 2008, but has since expanded globally.<sup>112</sup> The group’s website reads, “Our God is a Woman! Our Mission is Protest! Our Weapons are Bare Breasts!”<sup>113</sup> Femen posted the images to their own Facebook page, and Amina’s actions, as well as her affiliation with this well-known group, garnered both national and international attention. These images were very controversial in Tunisia, even among feminists, but they have become emblematic of the Tunisian feminist movement online. A quick Google search of “Tunisian feminism” reveals numerous images of Amina, as well as several other Femen members protesting against her subsequent arrest, and ultimately against Islamism itself. Although many women argue that the images do not represent the Tunisian feminist movement, their attention and prominence makes them influential online entities that require exploration.

Specific ethical problems arise when conducting international, feminist research. As a researcher from a western institution, it is my responsibility to identify unequal power dynamics between the research subjects, and myself, and to take steps to mitigate the effects of these

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<sup>110</sup> *Chez Amal* (blog), <https://collectifchaml.wordpress.com>.

<sup>111</sup> See appendix A.

<sup>112</sup> David M Herszenhorn, “Ukraine’s Feminist Shock Troops,” *The New York Times*, May 31, 2013.

<sup>113</sup> “Femen: About Us,” *Femen*, accessed October 16, 2016, <http://femen.org/about-us/>.

differences. For many years, scholars of the Middle East rooted their scholarship in deeply sensationalist, exotic and stereotypical depictions of the region. In 1978, Palestinian-American Edward Said wrote *Orientalism*, a critical work about the bias in institutions, and Orientalist education programs. “In quite a constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand,”<sup>114</sup> Said states. He stresses the inherent power dynamic that exists between western institutions and subjects in the Middle East, and to ignore the inherent inequality of discourse and study would reinforce them. Since this investigation focuses on feminism, the research processes and ethical considerations for this study also work to align themselves with feminist research methodology. Feminist research considers the recognition of the unequal power dynamic between the researcher and subject as one of the most important aspects of ethical practice.<sup>115</sup> The researcher’s inherent privilege stems from their ability to speak on behalf of the research subject, while they simultaneously attempt to bring the “voices of the silenced and/or oppressed to mainstream dialogue.”<sup>116</sup>

And while it is impossible to completely eliminate the power structures that have existed in society for decades of scholarship, there are ways to approach this project that will help to lighten the effects of this dynamic. Motivation is an important aspect to consider when evaluating the ethical considerations of research. As Said explains, “There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic

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<sup>114</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House Inc., 1978), 7.

<sup>115</sup> Linda Bell, “Ethics and Feminist Research,” in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2014), 85.

<sup>116</sup> Sharlene Hesse-Biber, “A Re-Invitation to Feminist Research,” in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2014), 6.

enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion.”<sup>117</sup> The intention of this project is to increase cultural understanding about an area of the world often misrepresented in western discourse, especially in terms of feminist study, and is not in any way motivated by cultural exploitation. Feminist research practice also offers a model to ensure respect for one’s subjects. Feminist researcher, Linda Bell, recommends an ethics of care, as she explains, “A feminist ethics of care is a model that emphasizes responsibility and caring relationships rather than more abstract ideas about rights, justice, virtues, or outcomes.”<sup>118</sup> What this means is that the researcher should focus attention on the subjects’ selfhood, and to make conscious decisions to preserve it.<sup>119</sup> This is an incredibly subjective model of ethics, but Bell explains that the subjectivity is what gives the method strength, as it allows the researcher to decide which issues are most damaging, and which values are most important for the subjects based on their context. Throughout the study, in my choice of sources, interactions with sources, analysis and conclusions, following Bell’s model, I work to preserve the selfhood of each subject. What this means, in practice, is that I paid special attention to the intentions, ideologies, and private lives of each of my subjects. Although Mhenni’s blog, *A Tunisian Girl*, and Amina’s photographs behave more like mass media than personal spaces, Chaml’s social networking activities required special considerations in order to preserve the selfhood of subjects and respect the privacy of members. The specific considerations will be discussed in the next section. I recognize that it will be impossible, due to my positionality as a cultural outsider, to completely eliminate any ethical problems and unequal power dynamics. Nonetheless, I have taken steps to minimize them as much as possible. This is important and necessary research, and it would do

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<sup>117</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, xix.

<sup>118</sup> Bell, “Ethics and Feminist Research,” 80.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid*, 89.



the women engaging in online feminism a disservice to ignore their developments for fear of misrepresentation. Their advancements and activities in Tunisia reveal insight about non-western feminism, as well as the structure and function of newly formed feminist movements and online activism. Understanding these dynamic phenomena will undoubtedly strengthen western academic discourse as a whole, and I will therefore continue the research despite its shortcomings.

It is imperative, however to recognize the limitations associated with this methodology, most notably the limited scope of this design. The internet offers an almost infinite possibility for exploration, because as online researcher Robert Kozinets points out, new information is constantly being added and archived.<sup>120</sup> Limiting this research in spatial and temporal scope limits the conclusions that I can draw, but it is necessary. Spatial limitations are a result of a case-study model, choosing only three internet entities to examine. I chose this model because it allowed me to explore these entities in greater depth, a decision which I believe was more fitting for the project, and allowed me to gain a better understanding of the way that the internet is involved in emerging, grassroots Tunisian feminism. Temporally, I limited the study to include any posts after October 23, 2011, which is the day that the country voted to elect a National Constituent Assembly (NCA) to draft a new constitution.<sup>121</sup> This date marks the end of one phase in the revolution, but allows for an analysis of reactions in the years of democratic transition including a period that offered numerous threats to women's rights. Although many people were active online between the revolution's onset and the election of the NCA, the period was heavily focused on regime change, rather than women's rights, and is therefore outside the scope of this paper.

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<sup>120</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 74.

<sup>121</sup> "National Constituent Assembly Elections in Tunisia," 2011.

There are also a number of limitations that are evident in the sources that I selected. Women residing in the greater Tunis region created each entity that I examine here, limiting the scope of research to urban feminism. It is important to note, therefore, that this project does not include online entities created by poor, rural women, and therefore cannot draw conclusions about Tunisian feminism as a whole. And although I cannot draw large conclusions about Tunisian feminism, this research still offers insight into the ways that specific Tunisian women are using the internet to advance their feminism. The sites that I chose for this project do not encompass the entire web, but they have high levels of support and readership, both nationally and internationally, and as a result, have a large effect on feminism in Tunisia, and around the world. The lack of inclusion of online entities created by women in the regions is a result of inequalities in web access and computer literacy. This is an important topic, but one that the limitations of scope in this project prevent me from exploring as a part of this study. Therefore, the conclusions of this study will be small, but it can still add meaningful contributions to research on the potential benefits of web technologies for women who seek to create a grassroots feminist movement in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

## **2.0 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

The following sections will include an overview and analysis of the three sources selected for case studies. The sections include the specific methodologies that I used in order to analyze each source. They are followed by a source overview, which gives background information on the source, followed by a discussion of the specific ethical and methodological considerations I apply during the course of my research. Each case study concludes with an analysis of the findings, drawing conclusions about the utilization of the internet as a tool for grassroots, feminist development in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

### **2.1 *A TUNISIAN GIRL***

#### **2.1.1 Online Ethnography**

To analyze my first two sources, the blog *A Tunisian Girl*, and the Chaml Collective, I used online ethnography. Ethnography is a form of research that traditionally relies on participant observation within a chosen field site, supplemented by other methods such as interviews. As the internet gained popularity, many scholars began to reimagine ways that the internet could be used as a source of ethnographic research, such as Christine Hine's formative work, *Virtual Ethnography*. Hine's work challenges traditional ethnographic practices, by arguing that virtual

ethnography does not require sustained presence in a field site.<sup>122</sup> Postill and Pink conduct what they describe as a social media ethnography, the framework for which they based off earlier works such as Hine's. According to Postill and Pink, methods of traditional ethnography "allow us to refigure social media as a fieldwork environment that is social, experiential and mobile."<sup>123</sup> This methodology allows the researcher to construct a field site that exists either partially or entirely online. Since Hine's work, numerous other researchers have reimagined the structure of her analysis to fit different online spaces and more recent technological developments. There are differences between each of the theorists, including the name they give to their research practice. In addition to Postill and Pink's *Social Media Ethnography*, and Hine's *Virtual Ethnography*, I based this research heavily off Robert Kozinets' *Netnography*. I will refer to my own methodology as online ethnography largely to differentiate it from these other works, as no one has been more influential than the others.

The first step in online ethnography is to define the field site. Although my field sites are not the physical spaces of traditional ethnographies, Kozinets argues in favor of treating them as such. Kozinets advocates in favor of a research practice he calls immersion, during which the researcher begins on the outside of the online environment, then dives into the online field site for a period of time, before leaving the environment and describing what occurred there to the offline world.<sup>124</sup> The majority of work on the case studies in this investigation occurred through immersion, through which I would never leave the physical place that I began, but spent time engaging, over the course of many months, new online environments. The purpose for these immersions was taking insights gained inside these environments to the outside world. However,

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<sup>122</sup> Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2000), 43.

<sup>123</sup> Postill and Pink, "Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web," 3.

<sup>124</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 82.

this process is not straightforward. Postill and Pink refer to a “messy web,”<sup>125</sup> to describe the ways that one site can be linked to another through hyperlinks and hashtags. The role of the ethnographer is not to disregard these connections but to explore them, even if he/she extends beyond the realm of the intended field site. Hine supports this, stating, “Ethnography of the internet can, then, usually be about mobility between contexts of production and use, and between online and offline.”<sup>126</sup> Hine rejects the idea that online field sites can have clear-cut limits, arguing in favor of a flexible approach. For the purpose of my own research, field sites are based off the specific blog or Facebook page or group, but the study is not limited to these. This process of exploring these connections formed a major part of my research practice. I followed links to articles, online events, other blogs, and earlier posts by the same author. Sometimes I would linger on the new site, even following a link embedded within that would take me to yet another site, and other times I moved on quickly. Sometimes events online referenced events or experiences offline, in which I would have to extend my research to account for the way that online spaces spill over into offline spaces. Throughout this entire process of “exploration,”<sup>127</sup> I kept extensive field notes about what I was observing and experiencing, a practice originating in traditional ethnographies, and extended by many different authors into online ethnographic methodologies as well. The purpose of these practices, although “messy,” to apply the term coined by Postill and Pink, was to gain insight into the ways that different women were using the internet to develop new feminisms.

Traditional ethnographies also rely heavily on participant observation, a concept that can be easily transferred to online ethnographies with small modifications. The basis of participant

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<sup>125</sup> Postill and Pink, “Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web,” 6.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, 7.

observation is to observe the way that people interact within a given field site. When analyzing complex, unbound, online field sites, it can be difficult to determine who should be included and whose actions should be observed. Kozinets suggests using “communities” as a unit of analysis when considering online social interactions, and that observations should include any members who are a part of the online community related to the field site.<sup>128</sup> However, Postill and Pink argue in favor of using “online socialities”<sup>129</sup> as a unit of analysis instead. Because the term “community” requires the researcher to make assumptions about who actually belongs to any given online space, I decided that the term socialities fit my research better by allowing more people to be included, and avoiding ethical problems connected to my decisions regarding who belongs to a given community and who does not. By analyzing online socialities, I was able to consider the content and contributions of people that are tangentially related to the field site, connected through links or direct reference, without making the assumption that they belonged to the group.

As a researcher, the final decision I had to make was whether or not I would participate in these spaces and interact with other people sharing the spaces. In the twelve steps Kozinets lays out for netnographic researchers, one phase, interaction, is dedicated to the researchers’ online communications with other human beings. He makes it clear that choosing to not interact online, and simply observe, is an option for researchers.<sup>130</sup> When developing my methodology I decided that it would be best to simply observe the observations, avoiding posting, commenting, liking, or sharing. Many researchers use this method because it increases the level of feedback and interaction that they experience; however, my reasons for rejecting this method are twofold.

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<sup>128</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 9-10.

<sup>129</sup> Postill and Pink, “Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web,” 5.

<sup>130</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 98.

First, I recognize my position as a cultural outsider, and feel that it is not my place to interact, and second, I wanted to observe organic interactions and uses of the online spaces.

The following two sources will follow this methodological design. Through the selection of field sites, immersion within those field sites, explorations of the connections to other online and offline spaces, and online participant observation, I was able to achieve a deeper understanding of these two sources. Below is an analysis of my findings, which highlight the ways that women are using the internet as a tool for grassroots, Tunisian feminism.

### **2.1.2 Source Overview**

In 2007, Mhenni began her blog, *A Tunisian Girl*, as a weapon to fight the censorship of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's regime. Mhenni is praised for being one of the only Tunisians who did not use a pseudonym, but wrote under her real name. In its early days, her blog focused on issues of censorship, women's rights, and human rights.<sup>131</sup> Drawing attention to concerns for Tunisia and issues with the state was strictly prohibited under the strict control of Ben Ali, whose regime controlled nearly all of the information readily accessible to the public, and many people chose to self-censor for fear of retribution from the regime. However, Mhenni did not engage in self-censorship, and continued to post even after Ben Ali's censorship police made her blog unavailable. She followed the methods popular among other Tunisians who found themselves in a similar situation, and began hosting her site on foreign servers, and using proxies. In a profile printed in *The New York Times*, Mhenni recounts the details of a break-in in her family home,

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<sup>131</sup> Kristen McTighe, "A Blogger at Arab Spring's Genesis," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/world/africa/a-blogger-at-arab-springs-genesis.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/world/africa/a-blogger-at-arab-springs-genesis.html?_r=1).

explaining that they took all her equipment used for blogging. She believed the break-in was carried out by the police who were trying to stop her from posting.<sup>132</sup>

Mhenni rose to international prominence for her role in the 2011 revolution that ousted Ben Ali, during which she continued to use proxies to overcome the media blackout that Ben Ali's regime had instituted at the onset of the unrest. Mhenni posted about the self-immolation of Sidi Bouzid street vendor Mohamed Boazizi, the event that sparked unrest all of the country, and inspired protests that ultimately led Ben Ali to flee the country. She traveled to regions where protests led to violent backlash from security forces, filling her blog with pictures of bloody protesters, violent clashes, and dead bodies. Due to her ability to write in Arabic, French, and English, and to speak the Tunisian dialect, Mhenni's blog became a source of information for Tunisians and international readers at a time when Ben Ali tried to cover-up the events in his country. She continued to write even after Ben Ali had fled, but during this time, she no longer had to rely on proxies, and was able to write freely about the events that followed his demise. Mhenni is often lauded for her efforts in helping topple the regime. She has been recognized by numerous sources,<sup>133</sup> and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.<sup>134</sup>

Mhenni's influence did not end with the fall of the regime, and her blog exemplifies possibilities and opportunities for the internet after the initial phases of the revolution came to an end. It is through this lens that I conducted an online ethnographic study of Mhenni's blog, beginning October 23, 2011, the day that the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) was elected. Using a public blog mitigates the potential to co-opt her voice or violate her privacy because her blog was created and updated with the knowledge and expectation of public consumption, even

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> These include Germany's Best Of the Blogs, and Influential young Africans

<sup>134</sup> Ryan, "Tunisian Blogger Becomes Nobel Prize Nominee."



by western readers considering she oftentimes writes in English or French. In this way, blogs behave more as mass media than personal communication, making research less invasive, and respecting the ethical considerations laid out above.

Before engaging in an analysis of the findings, it is important to note that Mhenni's blog is not specifically devoted to feminism. Women's rights are one among many topics that she addresses, but her blog still contains a clear, feminist perspective. The front page of her blog demonstrates her dedication to women's equality by hosting a picture of Amina Sboui, the ex-Femen activist who protested against Islamists for bodily autonomy. She also has a quote on the side of her front page that reads, "Social progress can be measured by the social position of the female sex."<sup>135</sup> Mhenni's blog is a prominent, woman-dominated online space. The ways that she shares her feminist ideologies, intertwined with her activism, make it an effective point of inquiry through which to explore the role of the internet in Tunisian grassroots feminism.

### **2.1.3 Analysis**

Through an analysis of the posts on the blog *A Tunisian Girl* from October 23, 2011 through October 11, 2016, I have concluded that her blog offers her the self-mediated entrance into the public sphere, transnational connections, and the ability to mobilize supporters for offline action. Each of these three mechanisms will be analyzed in-depth, and used to draw conclusions about the way the internet is employed in the production of post-revolution feminism.

One of the great benefits of blogging, particularly for women, is that it reduces the quantity and influence of gatekeepers, allows for individual agenda setting, and allows one to

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<sup>135</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, *A Tunisian Girl*, <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/>.

enter into discussions in the public sphere that they may otherwise be left out of. Blogging can be understood as a new form of mass media, produced by one or a more writers and contributors, and consumed by the masses. In this way, it has become an alternative to traditional mass media outputs. To understand Mhenni's expansion of the public sphere, I borrow from the theory of Jürgen Habermas, who describes the emergence of the public sphere as a historical period in which politics no longer occurred behind closed doors, but was subjected to the publication of political decisions, and their scrutiny and interpretation by citizens.<sup>136</sup> In this model, the public refers to "a body of 'private persons' assembled to discuss matters of 'public concern' or common interest."<sup>137</sup> However, many people have critiqued this analysis, claiming that it is not actually open to all citizens, but excludes on the basis of gender and class.<sup>138</sup> Feminist theorists, such as Loubna Skalli, have expanded their analysis of the public sphere to include alternative discursive spaces where women challenge the public/private dichotomy, and discuss matters they consider to be important. Skalli argues that these spaces become "internal" publics that they ultimately hope to "open up and extend to the larger public sphere of the nation-state."<sup>139</sup> I will use Skalli's modified model of the Habermasian public sphere to conceptualize Mhenni's ability to expand the inner public to a wider audience, ultimately expanding the conception of the public sphere.

Mhenni's ability to expand into the wider public sphere does not include gaining any traditional positions of power or political influence, but rather redefining traditional positions by

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<sup>136</sup> Eugenia Siapera, "Theorizing the Muslim Blogosphere: Blogs, Rationality, Publicness and Individuality," in *International Blogging: Identity, Politics, and Networked Publics*, ed. Adrienne Russell and Nabil Echchaibi (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2009), 32.

<sup>137</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 26, no. 25/26 (1990) doi:10.2307/466240, 58.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*, 59-60.

<sup>139</sup> Loubna H. Skalli, "Communicating Gender in the Public Sphere: Women and Information Technologies in the MENA," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2, no. 2 (2006): doi:10.2979/MEW.2006.2.2.35, 38.

creating her own. Mhenni overcomes the dominant, masculine narrative by instituting her own form of unmediated mass media, ultimately expanding the traditional public sphere to include the influence of new media formations, and accounting for the internal, feminine public space.

Mhenni is able to enter into wider publics by taking on the role of a citizen journalist, one that offers an alternative to the traditional media available to Tunisians. Mhenni's writing is informal, full of errors and spelling mistakes, and her English is frequently grammatically incorrect. This verifies that Mhenni's writing is entirely her own, and is not subjected to hierarchical editing processes or formal journalistic structures. Although formal censorship is no longer in place after the fall of Ben Ali's regime, this does not mean that reporting is free from bias. Mhenni's blog is a way to overcome biases, but also draw attention to them. In posts from May 12, 2012<sup>140</sup> Mhenni reports about journalists on a hunger strike against the corrupt allotment of state advertising funds that favorites certain sources, and offers a resources to support their protest. She also posts on June 1, 2012,<sup>141</sup> detailing incidents that threaten free speech and freedom of the press, over which she is outraged. Mhenni's blog also offers a medium through which she can overcome gender biases in formal reporting. According to the Global Media Monitoring Project's report in 2015, 61% of reporters in Tunisia are women (50% for print media). However, the report also shows that 81% of news subjects are male.<sup>142</sup> The fact that the media still greatly favors male subjects suggests both a lack of legitimacy for women's issues, and a bias amongst upper level positions in newsrooms. Once again, Mhenni's blog offers a mechanism to overcome these biases by eliminating gatekeeping techniques and allowing her to post about whatever subjects she prefers. Although some topics certainly lend themselves to

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<sup>140</sup> Mhenni, "Tunisian journalists on hunger strike," *A Tunisian Girl*, May 12, 2012.

<sup>141</sup> Mhenni, "Freedom of Press and Speech in Tunisia: Back to Black !!!," *A Tunisian Girl*, June 1, 2012.

<sup>142</sup> "Global Media Monitoring Project: Country Data Lists," 2015.

masculine subjects, such as terror attacks, Mhenni includes female-dominated subjects and narratives in numerous posts.

The most common way that Mhenni reports on female subjects is through first-person narrative, using her own experiences as the subject of her post. This is a mechanism unique to blogging and absent from formal journalism. In a post from August 7, 2012, titled “Assaulted by the Cops!” Mhenni details a violent assault she experienced at a peaceful protest against the government. She wrote,

Suddenly a policeman in plainclothes ... grabbed me by the arm and dragged me away from my friends. I started screaming and yelling, he was joined by two then three other cops and then their number increased... Indeed, one of them was holding me by the neck, two others tried to tear out my bag whereas the others were having fun beating me and tearing my clothes.<sup>143</sup>

By giving a first-person account of her assault, Mhenni is able to draw attention to abuse while giving it a feminine perspective. She selects other topics that are centered around traditional women’s issues, such as police raping a young girl, support for Amina’s protest, protests against the use of the word “complementary”<sup>144</sup> in the new constitution, a woman’s literary event and her own view of debates surrounding the burka and niqab.<sup>145</sup> Reporting alone is not enough to truly justify one’s success as expanding the public sphere. However, Mhenni’s international recognition shows that not only does she report on topics that are left out of dominant discourse, but many people engage with the materials she produces. She was not nominated for the Nobel Prize because her public sphere was closed off as a feminine-only space, but because it opened up to readers traditionally stuck in traditional publics.

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<sup>143</sup> Mhenni, “Assaulted by the Cops!” *A Tunisian Girl*, August 7, 2012, <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2012/08/assaulted-by-cops.html>.

<sup>144</sup> Charrad and Zarrugh, “Equal or Complementary? Women in the New Tunisian Constitution after the Arab Spring,” 234-235.

<sup>145</sup> These are two forms of garments worn by Muslim women. The niqab is a face veil that leaves the eyes clear, while the burka is a one-piece veil that covers the entire face and body.

Another way that Mhenni utilizes her blog is in the formation of transnational ties. One of the most notably aspects of *A Tunisian Girl* is that posts are written in English, Arabic and French. Although the majority of posts since October 2011 are written in French, the number of posts in English and Arabic are not far behind. Utilizing these three languages allow her to reach readers all around the world. While the topics of the posts generally differ based on the language, there are some occasions where the same post is written in two or more languages in order to maximize the readership. One of the best examples of this is a post from May 30, 2012 titled “Urgent help/ Aide urgenteمساعدة”<sup>146</sup> Even the title is written in all three languages to draw attention to it. The post includes a video of two young children and their parents, asking for help to get a liver transplant. The text, with instructions to help, is also in all three languages.<sup>147</sup> The use of multiple languages in Mhenni’s blog allows her to form relationships and alliances with people all around the world. She is invited to conferences all over the world to speak about the Tunisian revolution, human rights or women’s rights. Since October 2011, she has contributed articles to publications based in Germany, the UK, Sweden, and the US, all written in English. A post from February 23, 2012 is written in Spanish, and focuses on the decriminalization of marijuana,<sup>148</sup> while another post from May 27, 2013, links to an article written in Polish.<sup>149</sup> Mhenni posted about two separate trips she took to Oslo, one for the Oslo Freedom Forum in May 2012, where she presented in English, and another in October 2012 to participate in World Habitat Day. She has given two TedX talks, one in Tunis, Tunisia in 2014, during which she spoke the Tunisian dialect, and another in Lecce, Italy in 2015, which she presented in English.

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<sup>146</sup> Arabic, pronounced musaeada

<sup>147</sup> Mhenni, “Urgent help/ Aide urgenteمساعدة ” *A Tunisian Girl*, May 30, 2012, <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2012/05/urgent-help-aide-urgente.html>.

<sup>148</sup> Mhenni, ““Manifestación por la Despenalización del Consumo de Cannabis "Zatla" en Túnez” *A Tunisian Girl*, February 23, 2012, <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2012/02/manifestacion-por-la-despenalizacion.html>.

<sup>149</sup> Mhenni, “My Article for Maghreb + (Lech Walesa Institute of Poland): Sex dzihad i inne sprawy” *A Tunisian Girl*, May 27, 2013. <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2013/05/my-article-for-maghreb-lech-walesa.html>.

This long list is by no means exhaustive, but it demonstrates that Mhenni has indeed become a global figure. She is educated on the events of Tunisia and able to communicate effectively in three different global languages. Although Mhenni engages with transnational feminism in ways that place her at the forefront of the movement, and set her up as a useful example through which to analyze the possibilities for transnational feminism through blogs.

There are two ways that blogging can facilitate and aid in the development of transnational feminism. To begin, blogging is a way to get the world's attention on issues that the blogger wants to spotlight. This can be used to inspire pressure from external readers or organizations that push for more respect for human rights or women's rights. Mhenni does not use this tactic often, not exclusively for women, but her blog offers one key example. On August 9, 2012, Mhenni posted the same text in English and French, describing a protest outside the National Constituent Assembly (NCA), where elected officials worked to draft a new Tunisian Constitution. The protest centered around the inclusion of the term "complementary" to describe women's roles in relationship to men's. The post received comments in English, French and Arabic that encourage the protesters and praise their courage.<sup>150</sup> However, Mhenni also uses her transnational platform for grassroots feminist development by creating feminist alliances with women all over the world on her own terms. As highlighted earlier, Tunisia's presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali relied on the modification of the image of the Tunisian woman to create national alliances according to their own interests. Mhenni, instead, creates transnational ties outside those encouraged by these male presidents for their own political ends.

Mhenni spotlights many transnational feminist events and movements on her blog. In a post from January 24, 2012, she spotlighted a march, organized by the New Arab Woman

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<sup>150</sup> Mhenni, "Manifestation du 09/08 devant l'#ANC/ August 9th Demonstration outside the #NCA," *A Tunisian Girl*, <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2012/08/manifestation-du-0908-devant-lanc.html>.

Forum, which occurred in Beirut. The goal of the march was to hand over a list of demands to Lebanese Prime Minister, while cheering “No Spring without Women.”<sup>151</sup> The idea of pan-Arab women’s rights is a relatively new concept to Tunisian women, who for many years relied on the modernist, secular policies of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. After the revolution, when the system of state feminism collapsed with the fall an their autocratic leader, Tunisian women had an opportunity to create feminist ties with women all over the world, and many began exploring pan-Arabism and solidarity with Arab women. Another of Mhenni’s posts also demonstrates this concept of pan-Arabism, especially as it applies to women. The post links to an article Mhenni co-wrote with Yemeni blogger Afrah Nasser. The article is written as an email exchange between the two women, each of them discussing the post-Arab Spring conditions in their countries, and expressing their hopes and fears for the future of each. Nasser opens her email stating, “I have a greater sense of Pan-Arabism since I have been living in Sweden. Magically, I’m closer to all Arab countries while I’m in Sweden than when I used to be while living in Yemen. I attribute this to the fact that Sweden hosts tens of platforms to discuss issues related to the Arab world.”<sup>152</sup> Here Nasser addresses a newly inspired Arab identity, and attributes it to new platforms, which would include blogs and other internet resources that are easily accessible. Mhenni and Nasser discuss many issues, and the problems and achievements of the women in each of their countries are among them. Mhenni uses her blog to form transnational ties, which aid in the facilitation of new types of transnational feminisms, and can be a tool for Tunisian grassroots feminism after the revolution.

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<sup>151</sup> Mhenni, “New Arab Woman Forum concludes with “Sawa Sawa” March (February 2nd, 2012),” *A Tunisian Girl*, January 24, 2012, <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2012/01/new-arab-woman-forum-concludes-with.html>.

<sup>152</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni and Afrah Nasser, “Can You Tell Me More about Your Expectations for Your Country?,” *The Dissident Blog*, July 25, 2014, <https://www.dissidentblog.org/en/articles/can-you-tell-me-more-about-your-expectations-your-country>.

The final mechanism Mhenni employs through her blog is social mobilization, a beneficial tool for emerging, post-revolution feminists. Mhenni is aware of the tendency for online activists to remain behind screens, and addresses it openly on many accounts. In a post from November 15, 2011, Mhenni states, “In order to get information a cyber-activist should be on the ground.... So a cyber-activist is someone who is an activist, in the usual sense of the word and who furthermore uses internet in order to advocate for or against a cause. We cannot dissociate the online activism from the on ground activism.”<sup>153</sup> Not only is she aware of cyber-activism’s limitations, she also actively engages in social protests on the ground, being beaten and harassed many times for her actions, and shares these events on her blog. She also uses her blogging platform in order to enact social projects with offline consequences. She has posted the date and time of protests before they occur, sought monetary donations for young children’s liver transplants, and most recently, began a project to collect books to give to prisons to fight against radicalization. Mhenni’s blogging is not only a method to share her opinions, but a valuable tool for social mobilization. Her ability to do so effectively demonstrates the effectiveness of this mechanism for women as they seek to mobilize support for a new feminist movement in Tunisia.

Through these mechanisms, the self-mediated entrance into public discourse, formation of transnational ties, and ability to promote offline events, Mhenni’s blog demonstrates the potential online spaces offer for the formation of grassroots feminism.

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<sup>153</sup> Mhenni, “What Does Activism Mean Today? My Article Published by the Kraut Magazine,” *A Tunisian Girl*, November 15, 2015, <http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2011/11/what-does-activism-mean-today-my.html>.



## 2.2 THE CHAML COLLECTIVE

### 2.2.1 Source Overview

Following the revolution, Yosra Esseghir and Amal Khlif were looking for a way to get involved with a feminist organization. They began visiting some of Tunisia's long-established organizations, and realized that something was missing. Esseghir describes their problems, "When we began frequenting feminist organizations, we noticed that young women were absent and much less engaged, even disassociated from feminist struggles."<sup>154</sup> The women knew they were not the only ones who considered feminist questions, but they could not find the right place to express themselves. A short time later, Amal Amraoui joined the group, and they began interacting with women online, realizing that there were, in fact, many women who shared the same ideas about what feminism looks like.<sup>155</sup> These three women decided to fill a gap in Tunisian society, and they began *le Collectif Chaml*, "a collective that brings together young women concerned about feminist issues."<sup>156</sup> In 2014 they formed a Facebook page and corresponding blog. According to Esseghir, an online platform offered a great place to consolidate their group because it is free, unmediated, and popular among young women.<sup>157</sup> They have since expanded to include a closed Facebook group, which is more secure for discussions, and have also hosted a number of offline activities. By October 2016, the page had a little fewer than 3,300 likes, and the group had 61 members.

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<sup>154</sup> Yosra Esseghir, email message to author, October 15, 2016.

<sup>155</sup> Amal Amraoui, email message to author, October 15, 2016.

<sup>156</sup> Yosra Esseghir, email message to author, October 15, 2016.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

In order to research the role of Chaml and its influence on grassroots feminism, I conducted an online ethnography, immersing myself in their online spaces, watching how people interact with the site and with each other, and exploring different connections available through the original site. The methods were very similar to those employed for the analysis of Mhenni's blog, with one distinct difference: the ethical considerations. One of the most important distinctions to make while conducting internet research is that between public and private information. This is not clear online, because even sites that are accessible are not intended to be public. Kozinets addresses this ethical dilemma, and much like Bell's suggestion of an ethics of care, he claims that the line is subjective. According to Kozinets, the researcher must judge whether or not the subjects have reason to believe their activities are private,<sup>158</sup> paying more attention to their perception than the actual reality. The people participating on Facebook likely perceive their interactions to be private, especially those that interact in the closed group. As a result, new measures of ethical conduct apply, including permission from gatekeepers, informed consent, and the option of anonymity.

To address each of these concerns, I reached out to Facebook moderators using the email address listed on their blog. I had been in communication with members of the Facebook group during my time in Tunisia, but decided to ask them explicitly before conducting any critical analysis. The moderators, Yosra Esseghir, Amal Khlif and Amal Amraoui, were excited about the project and gave explicit permission to examine the group and use their names. Over the course of the next two or three weeks, we exchanged numerous emails and Facebook messages in which they explained details about the group and answered my questions. I was upfront about my research intentions, which fostered a strong working relationship based on the concept of

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<sup>158</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined*, 152-153.

reflexivity,<sup>159</sup> allowing them insight into my research, but also an opportunity for them to contribute. The topics discussed in the group can include sensitive and stigmatized topics, especially in Tunisian society, such as domestic violence and sexuality. Therefore, I chose not to include the names of people who shared specific content. Recognizing the sensitivity of the topic and the possible issues related to identification follows Bell's ethics of care model, in which recognition of potential issues for subjects is subjective but incredibly important. This relationship of mutual respect between myself and the subjects, most notably the founders and other Facebook contributors, helped to uphold the subject's selfhood, and mitigate, although not eliminate, the effects of both orientalism and researcher bias discussed above.

### **2.2.2 Analysis**

Through an online ethnography, I concluded that Chaml offers a great example of how the internet can be used as a critical tool in grassroots feminist development. The collective uses the internet as a tool to encourage the free expression of ideas, conceptualize new forms of Tunisian feminism, create transnational feminist connections, and organize offline events. The way that Chaml employs these methods will be explored in-depth in order to demonstrate the potential of online feminist spaces, and their power in crafting a grassroots feminist movement.

One of Chaml's most important tools is that, through their online spaces, they encourage the free expression of ideas, which offers potential to encourage feminist development. Khlif states, "We wanted to create a space where we can speak freely on issues (intimate or general)

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<sup>159</sup> Bell, "Ethics and Feminist Research," 97.

that we share... above all else, Chaml is a space of free expression.”<sup>160</sup> A large majority of the posts on the Facebook page are links to articles or videos relating to topics of concern for women. These articles and videos are from news sources, feminist publications and personal blogs from all over the world. The topics of these posts are diverse, including commentaries on the burkini ban in France, an exploration of the complexities of abortion in Tunisia, articles about the normalization of menstruation and information on the female condom, to name a few. The page’s administrators, the three founding members, post the majority of the articles and videos, and members interact by reacting to posts, generally with a like. Comments and discussions on the posts are not common, but when they do occur, contributors’ comments include agreement and affirmation of an article’s ideas, or a discussion about an individual’s experience with a similar issue. Within the closed Facebook group, members are much more likely to post their own thoughts and ideas and discuss them openly. These discussions include plans to attend an event, reactions to a recent experience or a discussion on the merits of any particular article. Although the Facebook group is active and conversational, one of the best examples of Chaml’s dedication to free expression is their blog, *Chez Amal*.<sup>161</sup>

Women who post to the blog write about a wide range of topics, many of which are perceived as taboo, but they discuss them openly, oftentimes detailing in their posts deeply personal experiences. One particular post details a woman’s experience with the female orgasm and her struggles with sexuality and desire.<sup>162</sup> According to the collective’s founders, they encourage free writing as a form of liberation, especially writing about taboo topics, the

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<sup>160</sup> Amal Khlif, email message with author, October 15, 2016.

<sup>161</sup> *Chez Amal* (blog), <https://collectifchaml.wordpress.com>.

<sup>162</sup> “L’Orgasme Insulaire,” *Chez Amal*, April 27, 2016, <https://collectifchaml.wordpress.com>.

expression of which Esseghir feels has been stolen from women in Tunisian society.<sup>163</sup> As Amraoui explains, “We encourage women to talk, to question, and to be free.”<sup>164</sup> For these women, and those that participate in the collective, words become a source of power and liberation. According to Amraoui, free expression is not passive, but it holds political, and liberating power. When writing about Chaml, a German blog named *Alsharq* states, “The experiences and problems of each author are conceived as a structural problem of society as a whole.”<sup>165</sup> This past June, Chaml hosted an online event called “La système m’a tué” (the system killed me) or “La société m’a tué” (society killed me). The event description was an open call for testimonies from people who felt that society was failing them, asking them to share their struggles with the current system in Tunisia. It reads, “Testify here, it does not change much but is denounced, above all, we empty the bags.”<sup>166</sup> People shared their experiences with sexism, racism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination, using a common hashtag. Chaml compiled all the posts on the event page and their own Facebook page. Their support for the power of testimony is not limited to this event, and people will post their experiences to the Facebook page, or more commonly the group. Their support for testimonies stems from the notion that sharing experiences offers people a chance to lighten the burden, as the event described, but it also demonstrates a belief that personal experiences are part of systematic failings, as the event name implies. The sentiment that words are political and that personal experiences demonstrate systematic shortcomings is reminiscent of one of the most common expressions in second-wave, American feminism, that the personal is political. This phrase

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<sup>163</sup> Yosra Esseghir, email message to author, October 15, 2016.

<sup>164</sup> Amal Amraoui, email message to author, October 15, 2016.

<sup>165</sup> “Feminismus in Tunesien: Wir haben sie gesehen,” *Alsharq Blog*, March 3, 2016.

<sup>166</sup> “Le système m’a tué #Gtaltouna” Facebook event, accessed October 22, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/events/486117914922040/>.

originated as the title of a short piece by Carol Hanisch in which she described early “therapy” groups, and her realization that individual problems require systematic change, rather than personal solutions.<sup>167</sup> Although Tunisian feminism is vastly different than second-wave American feminism,<sup>168</sup> the sentiment that the expression of individual thoughts and feelings can have political implications is consistent between them. According to this belief, the free expression available through Chaml’s sites is a key for the development of grassroots feminism.

Chaml also uses online spaces to conceptualize new forms of Tunisian feminism that account for the diversity of Tunisian women. On their Facebook page, the group is described as “a feminist collective created in 2014 by a group of young Tunisian women who feel the need to express themselves, to discuss women’s issues, and which by their diversity, are eager to deconstruct the myth of *”la femme tunisienne.”*”<sup>169</sup> The women who found the collective described the imagery embedded in the phrase *la femme tunisienne*. It was an image that was widely used under Ben Ali, but is still used frequently in the media today. *La femme tunisienne* is a liberated Tunisian woman who is “a businesswoman, doctor, or pilot, who is often from the upper middle class, white, and educated.”<sup>170</sup> As indicated earlier in this study, this was the image that Ben Ali used to support his feminist project, an image that was often encompassed by his wife, Leila Ben Ali. The women of Chaml wanted to create a new form of feminism beyond this imagery that accounts for women’s diversity, and gives a voice to a multitude of feminine experiences.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Carol Hanisch, “The Personal Is Political,” n.d., <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>.

<sup>168</sup> Second-wave, American feminism occurred between the 1960s and 1990s and focused on the workplace, family dynamics, sexuality, reproductive rights, and passing the Equal Rights Amendment.

<sup>169</sup> Chaml Facebook page, accessed October 20, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/collectif.chaml/?fref=ts>

<sup>170</sup> Yosra Esseghir, email message with author, October 15, 2016.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

Chaml is able to deconstruct this imagery through their online spaces. As discussed above, the Facebook page, Facebook group and blog host posts on a variety of different subjects, some of them taboo to talk about in society. The plurality and diversity of the topics allows the group to explore different feminist ideas and expressions, not simply those conceptualized by Ben Ali and the media. For example, Ben Ali's symbolic version of the Tunisian woman was upper class and educated, but Chaml posts an article calling for the celebration of rural women, another for support of Tunisian textile workers, and another calling for support for women in agricultural work. Their blog includes many perspectives on being a lesbian in Tunisia, including one, written in English, in which the author's mother rejects her because she is in love with a woman. The author wrestles with the pain of her mother's rejection of her, and the hope she receives from the woman she loves.<sup>172</sup> Conversations about homosexuality in Tunisia are often completely absent from discussions of identity and what it means to be a Tunisian woman due to the lack of support for members of the LGBTQ community in Tunisia. Chaml overcomes society's limitations by creating a space where the intersections of various parts of women's identities are expressed. From these intersectional identities they can create a diverse, plural form of feminism that is not shaped by Ben Ali or the media, but by women themselves, through their words, stories, expressions, and interactions with different feminist ideas in these online spaces. Khlif describes their mission, "We believed from the start that the liberation of women is not an elitist affair, but a collective mission."<sup>173</sup> They do not want feminism to be defined at the top, because it does not represent the diversity of women in Tunisia, so they use their online spaces to define and conceptualize a new form of grassroots Tunisian feminism.

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<sup>172</sup> "Tow Girls," *Chez Amal*, December 14, 2015.

<sup>173</sup> Amal Khlif, email message with author, October 15, 2016.

Chaml also uses online spaces to embrace transnational ideas. Although the group focuses on the conceptualization of Tunisian feminism, they do so by drawing on ideas from all over the world. As I describe above, the Facebook page and group relies heavily on sharing articles and videos related to women's issues and experiences. The source of these posts is diverse, and they are in different languages, originating in different countries. For many years, Tunisian feminists have aligned with western feminists, especially under Bourguiba and Ben Ali. This association is reinforced through posts on Chaml's sites from France, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. However, they expanded their horizons and have also aligned themselves with feminists in other parts of the world, including Egypt, Palestine, Israel and Lebanon. Chaml shares content from the *Huffington Post Maghreb* and *Jadaliyya*, an academic journal from the Institute of Arab Studies. Sharing this content demonstrates an understanding and desire to form regional ties, and explore different aspects of their identities. Instead of accepting the image of *la femme tunisienne* as a white woman, Chaml explores their Arab identity through these posts. Many Tunisian women speak French, and a large number speak English as well, which allows for this type of transnationalism. Their posts on Facebook are in Arabic, French, English and the Tunisian dialect, and the comments on posts are as diverse. Even the blog, which is produced entirely by Tunisian women writers, is written in Arabic, French, and English. The cultural foundation of Tunisia, especially their linguistic diversity and interactions with many different cultures over their history, places them in an ideal position to engage with transnationalism. The internet facilitates this by allowing Tunisian women access to content from all over the world without having to find the means to actually travel. Chaml capitalizes on the ideal position that many Tunisian women are in culturally and linguistically,



by embracing transnational feminism, posting content that originates all over the world, and using these diverse influences to shape their own grassroots feminist development.

Finally, Chaml uses the internet to organize offline events and actions, which contributes to the development of grassroots feminist development. Chaml administrators consider offline action to be a critical part of their collective's movement.<sup>174</sup> They plan offline events and use their online platform as a method of promotion. In May 2016, Chaml worked with another feminist organization, CHOUF, to organize the Chouftouhanna Festival. CHOUF is also dedicated to contemporary feminist issues in Tunisian society, with a focus audio-visual activism and the rights of lesbian women.<sup>175</sup> This was CHOUF's second year hosting the festival, which brought artists from all over the world to Tunis, to share how feminism is expressed through art.<sup>176</sup> Women shared photography, paintings, films, and live performances at the festival, which included about 120 artists from 37 different countries.<sup>177</sup> Chaml is dedicated to the way that women express themselves through writing, and as a result, they have hosted a number of themed public readings, including those on feminist poetry, and on the topic of the body.<sup>178</sup> Chaml advertises these events on their Facebook page, and after the events they post the writings to their blog, demonstrating the way that their online space works in tandem with offline events. According to Esseghir, "I consider the on the ground actions to be a success in terms of quality, originality of the content being presented... and subjects."<sup>179</sup> However, Chaml's administrators have had a hard time garnering public interest for their events. Esseghir also says that they have had a problem with people who express interest online, but do not actually participate in offline

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<sup>174</sup> Yosra Esseghir, email message with author, October 15, 2016.

<sup>175</sup> "About Us," *Chouf Minorities*, n.d., <http://chouf-minorities.org/about-us/>.

<sup>176</sup> Lilia Blaise, "New Generation of Feminists Strike out in Tunisia," *Middle East Eye*, July 28, 2016.

<sup>177</sup> Zeineb Marzouk, "Northern Tunis Prepares For Three Days Of Art," *Tunisia Live*, May 12, 2016.

<sup>178</sup> Chaml Facebook Events, accessed October 22, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/collectif.chaml/events/>.

<sup>179</sup> Yosra Esseghir, email message with author, October 15, 2016.

events.<sup>180</sup> They use their online platform to promote these events, but have had a difficult time getting people to actually attend, which is a great concern for Chaml as they move forward. Although this disconnect provides a hurdle to the expansion of their feminist initiatives, the use of the internet to promote offline action demonstrates great possibility for the future of Tunisian grassroots feminism.

An analysis of the Facebook page and blog of the Chaml Collective offers an example of how the internet can be used effectively to create and support a Tunisian grassroots feminist movement after the revolution. They use their online spaces to promote free expression, deconstruct the elitist image of *la femme tunisienne*, participate in transnational feminisms, and organize and promote offline events. Although the collective experiences some problems with participation, overall they demonstrate a successful post-revolutionary movement in which women are shaping their own version of feminism outside of the version created and promoted by the state.

## **2.3 TOPLESS PHOTOGRAPHS OF AMINA SBOUI**

### **2.3.1 Cultural Visual Analysis**

Now this study takes a slightly different turn. The analysis of the blog, *A Tunisian Girl*, and of the Chaml Collective, both relied on an online ethnographic methodology. This approach was based on the consideration that these were online field sites into which one can enter. The last feminist entity that will be examined is not an online space, but two individual images of

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

Tunisian activist Amina. An ethnographic approach will not work for these images because there is no locality for the images. The original posts have been removed, and the internet now hosts a large variety of copies of the original photographs. The lack of a concrete, online location of the photographs requires a new methodology and justifications for examining online images.

The culture we live in today is one saturated with images, supported by technological developments in the late twentieth century that have made images easy to create, view, replicate, and share, and have rendered everyday life a part of visual culture.<sup>181</sup> The emergence of social media has increased this phenomenon, and made images of the self gain even more traction. In this particular cultural moment, when social media and networked connectivity have become the norm, images are not stagnant, but become “spreadable media.”<sup>182</sup> In his book on this topic, Henry Jenkins describes the term as “an emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways.”<sup>183</sup> It is into this digitized, visual, connected culture that the images of Amina enter. As images become more and more common, one may expect them to lose saliency. However, Jenkins’ model of spreadability counters this assumption, demonstrating that the ability of images to be spread actually renders them more salient, as they are able to quickly reach larger audiences, who interact with the images individually. As media spreads, “it gets remade: either literally... or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms.”<sup>184</sup> Because of the proliferation of media and the participatory nature of spreadable media, it is far too reductionist to examine an image

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<sup>181</sup> Martin Lister and Liz Wells, “Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual,” in *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, ed. Theo van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2001), 62.

<sup>182</sup> Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

independent of the cultural forces that surround it. My analysis of Amina's photographs will use the methods outlined by cultural studies for examining the visual. This methodology fits the project because it considers cultural context to be a key factor in the interpretation of visual images, and does not disregard social processes.<sup>185</sup> This section is based on the a methodology laid out by Martin Lister and Liz Wells, which I reconfigured to use online I will refer to the methodology as cultural visual analysis. My analysis will take into consideration the context of production, conventions of the images themselves, and the context of viewing, while placing the images within a cultural narrative that details the experiences of Amina and the way that her actions played out in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

### **2.3.2 Source Overview**

Amina is a young, Tunisian activist who is best known for posting topless photos of herself with provocative phrases written on her body in association with the transnational feminist organization, Femen. In February 2013, the 18-year-old sent these two pictures to Femen before posting them on her personal Facebook page in mid-March. These pictures quickly spread online, and caused significant consequences for Amina. She was arrested, rejected from Tunisian schools and forced to eventually leave the country to finish her education. The response to the images also had an effect on the Tunisian feminist movement in general. A quick Google search of the phrase "Tunisian Feminism" reveals search results that are dominated by images of Amina, and other Femen protesters. The proliferation of these images online makes it an important source of inquiry in order to understand the role of the internet in Tunisian feminism. I

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<sup>185</sup> Lister and Wells, "Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual," 64.

will analyze this source using cultural visual analysis, but in order to analyze it, it is important to consider ethical considerations associated with the research. Like Mhenni, Amina produced these images herself, with the knowledge that they would be visible to many different people. In this way, these images behave as mass media, and therefore, it eliminates questions of cooptation and privacy invasion. This section will focus on analyzing these two images, including the cultural context that surrounds them, and exploring the role the internet played in Amina's feminist expression. It concludes with an analysis of the way that the internet serves as a tool for grassroots feminism, but also makes visible the limitations associated with Amina's form of feminist protest, notably that Femen's centrality overshadows the cultural context of Amina's actions.

### **2.3.3 Analysis**

Amina's protest offers insight into the possibilities the internet provides for grassroots, post-revolution Tunisian feminism, including the potential of self-publishing media, the potential to localize transnational ideas, the increased circulation the internet offers media, and the ability to connect women with transnational feminist networks. Cultural analysis of visual images focuses heavily on the context of image production. This form of analysis is important in a number of contexts, but when examining images on social media, it is relatively short and straightforward. The images of Amina are largely self-produced. It is possible that Amina received help writing the words on her body or taking the photographs, but they remained in her control, and it was her choice to both post them and send them to Femen. This ability to self-produce, and self-publish images is a major asset associated with the availability of the internet that takes away hierarchical claims to media, and reduces the voyeurism often associated with portraits,

especially those that are nude or semi-nude. It also makes analysis of the images simpler because all the methods and achievements associated with the images can be attributed to Amina herself, since she was the one who controlled her own photographs.

Moving forward with a basic understanding of the context in which the images are produced, I now take a deeper look at the images themselves. Amina posted two photographs in 2013.<sup>186</sup> In the first image, she is lounging on a dark chair or sofa, holding an open book in her right hand and a lit cigarette in her left. Her eyes are fixated on the book, and her bare chest is entirely exposed. On her chest, written in black paint, it reads in Arabic, “My body belongs to me, it is not the source of anyone’s honor.” The second image is very different than the first. In this image, Amina stands tall against a white, tile wall. She is staring directly at the camera with a slight smile on her face, while holding up both middle fingers. She wears nothing but jeans, and across her chest in black paint, are the English words, “Fuck your morals.” Cultural studies generally divides visual analysis into two subcategories, analyzing the photographic conventions then the social conventions used in the images.<sup>187</sup>

The photographic conventions I will be analyzing through Amina’s self-portraits are the frame, pose, and gaze. The framing of each image is very similar, centering Amina’s torso within the frame, and including very little in terms of background. The first image has the dark background of whatever seat she is lounging on, and the second includes nothing but a plain white tile wall behind her. Anything that would help to contextualize the images or give Amina personality is completely absent, and instead the viewer has little option but to focus on her bare chest. The poses she strikes in each photograph differ slightly. In the first, she lays back against her chair, seemingly more relaxed. It is a pose that is reminiscent of the many recognizable

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<sup>186</sup> See appendix A.

<sup>187</sup> Lister and Wells, “Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual, 73-77.”

female nude or semi-nude portraits of women by male painters, in which the woman lays back as a passive being for the male gaze,<sup>188</sup> but also a pose that displays a lack of interest in the fact that she is being photographed. Of course, we know that this image is staged, yet she appears disinterested and unaware. Amina's pose in the second image is entirely different. She is not laying back, but instead, stands tall with her hands raised in a gesture of disrespect. In doing so, Amina dispels any notions of passivity, and takes ownership of her semi-nude image. In each photograph, her gaze strengthens the messages conveyed by her posture and gestures. In the first image, she looks down at the book in her hand, reinforcing the idea that she is completely unaware of a photograph being taken, as well as disinterested and unfazed by her own nudity. In the second, Amina stares directly at the camera to show that she is aware that she is being looked at and to claim ownership of her nudity. The frame, pose, and gaze are all used to dispel notions of voyeuristic gaze as a source of poser, but instead Amina takes ownership of her nudity. This, too, demonstrates the power and potential of self-published media.

No image can be taken out of the social context into which it is being dispersed. The fact that Amina is topless is shocking because of the social context into which it enters. Social convention requires that women cover their breasts, so the very nature of exposing herself conveys certain messages to the viewer. By exposing her breasts, Amina establishes herself as a woman, feminizes her message and rejects the societal standards of modesty. By self-publishing a semi-nude portrait, Amina reclaims agency over the female body. As mentioned above, many artistic expressions of the female nude portray "man as subject-surveyor and woman as object-

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<sup>188</sup> For example, Henri Matisse's *Odalisque a la culotte rouge* (1921) or Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* (1814), among many others.

surveyed,”<sup>189</sup> and Orientalist art in particular often portrays nude women as lounging passively “waiting for space to be filled and history to be shaped by others.”<sup>190</sup> Instead, Amina reclaims the female body by staging, and publishing the images herself, and adding to them ideological statements that turn the body into a political tool. In Tunisia, the female body has been the battleground of male politicians who use it to convey messages of liberation, modernization or Islam, by recommending or requiring women to dress and cover themselves in particular ways. Amina’s reclamation of the female body removes it from men’s symbolic, ideological battles, and claims agency over the way she chooses to cover, or uncover it. Finally, Amina’s nudity occurs in a social context in which nudity is equated with vulnerability. As feminist theorist Judith Butler writes, “The skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence.”<sup>191</sup> Amina, however, does not appear vulnerable. In the first image, she appears unashamed of her own nudity, while in the second, she is empowered by it, once again demonstrating the power and agency she reserves for herself, and the merit of self-produced media.

There are other social conventions beyond Amina’s nudity that are at play in the images. Because she is associated with Femen, the social conventions of Femen protest need to be considered, and in many ways, Amina does not conform to the traditional methods of Femen activism. She does not protest topless on the streets, posted her topless photos online, and chose not to wear the iconic flower garlands that are a remnant of Femen’s Ukrainian roots. In one image, Amina also writes her message in Arabic script, uncommon for Femen protestors, and less recognizable around the world. Her rejection of Femen’s usual methods demonstrates the

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<sup>189</sup> Karina Eileraas, “Sex(t)ing Revolution, Femen-Izing the Public Square: Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, Nude Protest, and Transnational Feminist Body Politics,” *Signs* 40, no. 1 (2014): 44.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



locality of her protest, even though she is part of a large, transnational organization. Amina acts independently of the organization itself, and speaks directly to her Tunisian context. Across her bare chest, Amina has written two phrases “My body is my own and not the source of anyone’s honor,” and “Fuck your morals.” To make sense of these phrases and Amina’s hostility, it is imperative to examine the political and social environment in Tunisia at the time. In 2012 and 2013, Tunisian politicians and members of civil society were attempting to draft a new constitution, and as they did, they had to decide the type of government they wanted in place. There was a large debate over the role of religion in the new Tunisian system, which was met with increasing hostility between Islamist and secular supporters. In early 2012 women had fought off Ennahda’s attempts to describe the role of women as complementary to men in the constitution.<sup>192</sup> By 2013, there was a growing salafist<sup>193</sup> movement that attacked places like art exhibits and movie theaters for “blasphemy,” called for women to cover in public, and protested in favor of the division of genders at one of the largest universities in Tunis.<sup>194</sup> Amina is a self-proclaimed atheist,<sup>195</sup> and a supporter of secularism. When Amina writes “Fuck your morals,” it is safe to assume that the ‘you’ she refers to are radical Islamists, either in the Ennahda party or the salafists on the street, both of which were trying to control the actions of women in favor of morality. The other phrase, written in Arabic, also refers to a cultural moment in which men were trying to control women’s bodies. She rejects this by writing, “my body is my own, and not

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<sup>192</sup> Charrad and Zarrugh, “Equal or Complementary? Women in the New Tunisian Constitution after the Arab Spring, 234-235”

<sup>193</sup> Salafism is an Islamic ideology dedicated to the purification of Islam. According to Salafism, true Islam is that which is explicitly defined by Muhammad, anything else is a perversion. Historically, the ideology is not political, but began acting political after the Arab Spring. For a larger discussion, see Jacob Olidort, “What is Salafism?”

<sup>194</sup> Mounir Khelifa, “Tunisian Revolution III: Second Democratic Transition” (lecture, School of International Training, Sidi Bousaid, Tunisia, September 14, 2015).

<sup>195</sup> C. M. Reestorff, “Mediatized Affective Activism: The Activist Imaginary and the Topless Body in the Femen Movement,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 20, no. 4 (2014): 483, doi:10.1177/1354856514541358.

the source of anyone's honor." Amina's highly personal messages and writing show the potential online imagery has to localize transnational ideologies, such as those of Femen.

The final step in a cultural analysis of these images requires the consideration of the context in which they were viewed, noting where these images were located in the physical world, and what forces affected the way that people interpreted them.<sup>196</sup> The images were located online, specifically on Amina's personal Facebook page, and the Facebook page for the Tunisian branch of Femen. Using Facebook as a medium, as well as associating herself with Femen, both facilitate spreadability. According to Jenkins, "'Spreadability' refers to the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of media text that might appeal to a community's motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes."<sup>197</sup> The images were digital, which makes them technologically capable of being spread, but as Jenkins suggests, their spreadability was also facilitated by their emergence into an already existing network. Femen has become a transnational organization, with headquarters in Ukraine and France, and national groups all over the world.<sup>198</sup> Because Femen's international activism relies heavily on media attention, they have a well-established format and network for spreading images.<sup>199</sup> The images of Amina entered into this network, granting them international recognition and easier spreadability. Entering this already established organization also had a major effect on the way that people interpreted Amina's images. Although they are international, Femen is also a very centralized organization. As Camilla Reestorff notes, "The

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<sup>196</sup> Lister and Wells, "Seeing Beyond Belief: Cultural Studies as an Approach to Analysing the Visual, 65."

<sup>197</sup> Jenkins, Ford, and Green, *Spreadable Media*, 4.

<sup>198</sup> "Femen: About Us."

<sup>199</sup> Reestorff, "Mediatized Affective Activism: The Activist Imaginary and the Topless Body in the Femen Movement," 484.

movement provides a framework in which the local protesters are recognized and realized... [but] the centralization of the movement also entails an increasing amount of centralized explanations for localized actions.”<sup>200</sup> Although Amina’s images were localized by the Arabic script and directed message, they will be interpreted using Femen’s centralized ideologies, overshadowing the context within which she protested, and the message that she intended to convey.

Finally, it is important to consider the context of Tunisia at the time, in order to understand not only the message she attempted to convey, but also the way that message was interpreted. The political context into which these photos entered was described above. It was a time of increased Islamization, moral policing, and questions about what women’s role would be in Tunisian society. When these pictures emerged on social media, Amina received abusive comments and even death threats online. Her family came to take her away from the capital where she was staying to her hometown, and locked her inside the house.<sup>201</sup> A Wahhabi Salafi<sup>202</sup> preacher, Almi Adel, recommended that Amina receive 80-100 lashes or be stoned to death for her actions,<sup>203</sup> and many other salafists supported this, protesting against her actions outside the courthouse in her hometown. A few weeks later Amina was arrested for writing “Femen” on a wall at a protest, and after her release, she was rejected from the public school system, and forced to finish her studies in France.<sup>204</sup> Even prominent liberals condemned Amina’s actions, such as feminist and opposition leader Maya Jribi who states, “Here, Islamists try to explain women’s issues in terms of identity politics... We Tunisian feminists are trying to steer the

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 491.

<sup>201</sup> Daniel Silas Adamson, “100 Women 2015: Return of a Topless Rebel,” *BBC News*, November 28, 2015.

<sup>202</sup> Wahhabism is another Islamic ideology that is very similar to salafism, relying on a strict interpretation of the Qu’ran, and it is the dominant faith within Saudi Arabia.

<sup>203</sup> Jessica Elgot, “Topless Tunisian Protester ‘Amina’ Threatened With Death By Stoning,” *The Huffington Post*, March 22, 2013.

<sup>204</sup> Adamson, “100 Women 2015: Return of a Topless Rebel.”

discussion away from identity. Women's rights are a social and political issue."<sup>205</sup> These reactions to Amina's photos demonstrate a reaction dependent on the context into which the images enter, and the effect of that context on the people who are viewing them. Her protest would likely have been received differently had it occurred elsewhere, but the Tunisian political environment was not receptive to her actions. These reactions also point to the saliency of online activism, which is sometimes trivialized through references to armchair activism or slactivism.<sup>206</sup> However, Amina's experiences after posting these images had real-world consequences, and sparked a lot of offline actions.

It is important to note, that in August 2013, months after she posted the images, Amina quit Femen, citing their Islamophobic, anti-religious rhetoric. Although a self-identified atheist, Amina recognizes that all religious identities need to be respected, stating, "That offends many Muslims and many friends of mine. We must respect everyone's religion."<sup>207</sup> This controversy highlights a potential issue, in which online transnational connections overshadow local movements. Although Amina does not believe all Muslims are to blame for Tunisia's issues, her ideologies are lost and overshadowed by the ideas of the central organization.

Although her protest was imperfect, the two topless photographs of Amina offer a useful example for how the internet, specifically online imagery, can be used for feminist development. Because of advances in technology, people are able to take more control over the images they present to the world. Amina's photographs demonstrated the power of self-publishing media that allows women to reclaim agency, specifically over images of women themselves. Amina's

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<sup>205</sup> Reestorff, "Mediatized Affective Activism: The Activist Imaginary and the Topless Body in the Femen Movement," 491.

<sup>206</sup> Eileraas, "Sex(t)ing Revolution, Femen-Izing the Public Square: Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, Nude Protest, and Transnational Feminist Body Politics," 48

<sup>207</sup> "Tunisia's Amina Quits 'Islamophobic' Femen," *France 24*, August 20, 2013, <http://www.france24.com/en/20130820-jailed-tunisia-activist-amina-leaves-islamophobic-femen-organisation>.

protest also demonstrates the potential to localize transnational ideas through self-publishing online. The way that it played out in a particular context demonstrates the potential of the internet to increase circulation of online media, connect women to transitional networks, and affect offline spaces.

### 3.0 CONCLUSION

Based on an in-depth analysis of the blog *A Tunisian Girl*, the Chaml Collective, and the topless images of Amina Sbouï, there are a number of conclusions that need to be highlighted about the role of the internet in the production of post-revolutionary grassroots, Tunisian feminism. It is imperative to recognize that this study is limited in scope, but its findings contribute to a larger body of scholarship surrounding online spaces and their effects on offline movements.

The three sources I selected to analyze for this study are extremely different, but they all played, or continue to play a role in the development of post-revolution, grassroots Tunisian feminism. In fact, although the sources themselves are distinct, my findings show that they share a number of common strategies in order to promote new feminist ideas.

First, each source made use of the internet to create transnational feminist connections. The ability to connect with people around the world for minimal cost, without having to relocate physically, is a key strength of online technologies. This allows new ideas to enter into discussions, and promotes more diverse forms of feminist development. Transnational connections can facilitate new networks that strengthen the feminist movement by creating a larger body of support, and by augmenting resources and attention. These connections also allow women to explore alternative aspects of their own identities, rather than those that are limited to their current locality. Although the women in each source achieve transnational connections differently, they are a key strength of internet feminism.

Each source also challenges the ideas that online social movements are ineffective. As the internet continues to develop, many writers have criticized online movements, calling them impersonal and arguing that they have little impact beyond making users feel good about themselves.<sup>208</sup> My analysis challenges these critical assumptions about online activism by finding that online sources can actually have a significant effect on offline spaces, through mobilizing people for marches, collecting donations, organizing awareness campaigns, planning artistic events, and sparking widespread protest, among others. Although women from Chaml note that this aspect of development is a significant challenge, they have hosted a number of successful events. The online and the offline are not two separate spheres; instead they work in tandem, each affecting the other.

Finally, all three of the sources promote individual, feminine agency. This manifests itself differently through each source, but in each case, the reduction of gatekeepers and easy access to the internet allow women more control over the words and images they are producing and consuming. Men have dominated the Tunisian feminist movement for years, and even after the fall of the regime, they continue to control political discussions, even those concerning women. The internet has allowed women to publish their own thoughts and opinions, and reclaim agency over their words and their image in Tunisian society.

Although all three entities embrace common methods for feminist development, this study also identifies the way that certain online entities are better suited to achieve specific goals than others. Amina's method of protest allowed her to increase the spreadability of her message and to localize a transnational movement. On the other hand, the discussion-based structure of

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<sup>208</sup> Evgeny Morozov, "The brave new world of slacktivism," *Foreign Policy*, May 19, 2009, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/05/19/the-brave-new-world-of-slacktivism/>.

Chaml's Facebook page and group facilitate the deconstruction of the myth of *la femme tunisienne*.

Ultimately, the analysis of these three unique sources demonstrates that the internet is an important tool to promote grassroots feminism in Tunisia following the collapse of the state feminist system in 2011. The ability of these entities to promote feminist development applies specifically to this context, and the limited scope of the project, both geographically and temporally, limits the conclusions that I am able to draw. Since this study is so limited, specifically to the context of urban Tunisians, it would greatly benefit from a future expansion that explores internet use in the rural areas of Tunisia. An expansion like such would allow further exploration into the populist forces that are pushing against feminist development in Tunisia, and how these forces, as well, intersect with new technologies. However limited the original project may be, these findings contribute to a growing body of scholarship that explores the intersection of online and offline spaces, and the effects of new technologies on social development, and above all, on feminism.



## APPENDIX A

### IMAGES OF AMINA SBOUI

This appendix includes information on how to access the two topless images of Amina Sboui referenced above. The images are no longer available on the sites on which they were originally published, but these are the two original images found elsewhere online.

Image 1: Amina, *La Huella Digital*, accessed November 1, 2016, <http://www.lahuelladigital.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/amina.jpg>.

Image 2: Amina's protest against Islamic morals, Tunisia 2013, *Femen*, accessed November 1, 2016, <http://femen.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Amina-215x300.jpg>.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **LIST OF INTERVIEWS**

Amraoui, Amal. Email message with author. October 15, 2016.

Ben Gharbia, Sami. Interview with author. Tunis, November 26, 2015.

Chebbi, Aya. Interview with author. Tunis, December 3, 2015.

Chennaoui, Henda. Interview with author. Tunis, November 26, 2015.

Esseghir, Yosra. Email message with author. October 15, 2016.

Khlif, Amal. Email message with author. October 15, 2016.

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