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# *Finding Voice through Film Viewing: Tunisian Women Interpret Gendered Violence in Post-revolutionary Tunisia*

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on a 2019 study about female perception of violence against women (VAW) in post-revolutionary Tunisia triggered by their viewing of the Tunisian film, *The Beauty and the Dogs (La Belle et La Meute)*. The year-long study began with a one-time, in depth interview with the female filmmaker, Kaouther Ben Hania, followed by field research that included eight film screening sessions and post-viewing protocols with small audiences of Tunisian women and adolescents living outside of main metropolitan areas in the southern Tunisia. The filmmaker's interview elicited her thoughts about the motivation behind making the film and her ideas about the role of art in society. A post-viewing survey queried participants' background and their reactions to the film; the small focus group discussions expanded upon the broader themes of VAW to everyday life. Slightly more than 100 females participated in the study. The analyses of the surveys and focus group interviews suggest that they have very particular opinions about what actions constitute gendered violence; what women and young girls' behavior should be; and what kinds of initiatives are working to protect them from physical and sexual violence since the constitutional and legal reforms of 2014 and 2017.

**Keywords:** gender-based violence, Tunisia, post-revolution, audience reception theory, mixed methodology

## *Introduction*

Tunisia has long been recognized as one of the most progressive countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in terms of women's legal rights (Charrad & Zarrugh, 2013; Gender Concerns International, n.d.). In 1957, the country adopted the *Code of Personal Status (CPS)*. This legislation, championed by its first president Habib Bourguiba, recognized women's right to education and workplace opportunities. Although historians point to the 1926 *Turkish Civil Code* as the very first example of legislation that promoted Muslim women's civil rights in the modern era, the Tunisian CPS was the first legislation of its kind to be

adopted by a modern Arab-Muslim state (El-Sanabary, 2014). Today, in 2020, it is still so. Built upon ground-breaking jurisprudence that echoed Tahar Haddad's philosophical thinking of gender fairness, the CPS presented the legal guidelines that would recognize women as full citizens in Tunisian society. Through the years, Tunisian women groups and organizations have continued to advocate for guarantees to protect these rights by monitoring the actions and policies that effectively impeded these rights (Moghadam & Arfaoui, 2016). One area that has been of continuous concern is the level of violence directed at women (VAW) despite such favorable historic legislation. A 2010 National Study revealed that 47.6% of Tunisian women between the ages of 18 and 62 reported having been victim of at least one form of violence: physical (31.7%); sexual (28.9%), psychological (15%), and economic (7%) (ONFP/AECID 2010). Most recently, amidst the backdrop of the 2011 revolution and the subsequent three transitional years, the campaign to guarantee women's rights and protections has yielded important legislative changes. The *2014 Tunisian Constitution*, Article 46, specifically addresses gender equality and guarantees for protections of those rights, including eliminating VAW.

The State commits to protecting women's achieved rights and seeks to support and develop them. The State guarantees equal opportunities between men and women in the bearing of all the various responsibilities in all the fields. The State seeks to achieve equal representation for women and men in elected councils (parity). The State takes the necessary measures to eliminate violence against women.

In 2011, Tunisia ratified *The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, Tunisia became the first country in the region to ratify the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) without reservations<sup>2</sup> and was one of two countries in the region to adopt its Optional Protocol on human trafficking thanks to women activists who lobbied the government demanding action. Although Tunisia has yet to officially ratify the Council of Europe's *Istanbul Convention* on preventing and combatting VAW and domestic violence, the country

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<sup>1</sup> The *Rome Statute* established four core international crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression.

<sup>2</sup> In 1985, Tunisia ratified CEDAW but with reservations.

formally requested an invitation to sign the convention on September 30, 2019 (Council of Europe, 2019).

It was not until July 26, 2017, however, that the government amended the *Tunisian Penal Code* to align it with provisions addressing VAW in the new constitution and with these international conventions. Prior to 2017, Articles 236 and 227bis of the *Penal Code* called for imprisonment. It imposed a six-year prison term for convicted rapists of girls under 15 years old, and five years' imprisonment if the girl was older than 15 but younger than 20 years old. However, a legal loophole existed in Article 239, which granted immunity from prosecution for the accused rapists if they chose to marry their minor victim (13–20 years old). The 2017 Law no. 58 abolished this option. Furthermore, convicted rapists can now face a 20-year prison sentence, or a lifetime sentence if their victim, female or male, is under 16 years old or if they are related to or “*have an authority over*” their victim. This includes a spouse, ex-spouse, fiancé or ex-fiancé. The same law also mandates the State to engage in prevention efforts, prosecution of those involved in crimes of violence against women, and care for victims.

While the earlier version of the *Penal Code*, Article 236, also protected married women against spousal rape, a caveat in the CSP still exists that can protect the spouse. Under CPS Article 13, a husband who does not pay a dower cannot impose sexual relations on his spouse, which can be understood contrarily to mean that a husband who has paid the dower can impose his sexual will on his wife (Moghadam & Arfaoui, 2016; Tchaïcha & Arfaoui, 2017). Moreover, other legal ambiguities continue to circumvent protection against VAW. For example, Tunisia has not yet ratified the International Labor Organization's (ILO) *Conventions No. 189 and No. 190*. The former asks for decent work for domestic workers and the right to a healthy and safe working environment. The latter asks for a workplace free of violence and harassment, including gender-based violence, recognizing that such actions constitute human rights violations or abuse.<sup>3</sup>

As it is often the case with policy-making and the passage of legal reforms, application at the local and regional levels is difficult to achieve. According to a 2014 study investigating marital violence among 196

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<sup>3</sup> See the International Labor Organization website on updated listings of Conventions and Protocols not ratified by Tunisia.

women at a family planning center in Monastir, 56.9% reported that they had been victims of violence in marriage, at least once in their lives (Jellali, Jellali, Gataa, & Mechri, 2014). A 2016 study reported on VAW in public spaces between 2011 to 2015 based on the experiences of 3,000 women randomly selected from 200 urban and rural geographic areas across the country. Fifty-three percent reported experiencing psychological or physical violence at least once in public spaces (CREDIF, 2017). Most recently, six women shelters shared information about VAW incidents from around the country. In 2018, they received a total of 25,000 complaints; from 2018-2019 they received 40,000 complaints pertaining to marital violence (Blaise, 2019).

Disheartening as these numbers are about VAW, there is a positive side. More women appear more empowered to make their voices heard. Yet, far fewer women pursue legal recourse to the end. What is behind this gap? What factors influence women's perception of gendered violence? Do they believe that Tunisian institutions and laws are effective in addressing VAW? What other factors might contribute positively or negatively to the situation? The following study attempts to elicit some answers to these questions.

### *1. The Research Design and Methodology*

This year-long study centers on women's perception of gendered violence in post-revolutionary Tunisia, specifically sexual violence, triggered by their viewing of Kaouther Ben Hania's 2014 Tunisian film, *The Beauty and the Dogs*. The research design encompassed a film screening in eight different locations in southern Tunisia which women and young female adolescents attended. Afterwards, they completed a post-viewing survey and participated in small focus group discussions.<sup>4</sup> The decision to use film as a catalyst to elicit participation in the study was twofold. First, the film is one of the most popular and accessible media in Tunisia. Second,

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<sup>4</sup> All women were asked to sign an informed consent form, approved by Bentley University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and told that they could leave at any time during the film screening or research protocols. No one withdrew with the exception of one or two women in the discussion groups because of family obligations, thus accounting for about 5 % of the original number of participants.

given the sensitive nature associated with sexuality and sexual violence in Tunisia, using film was an indirect way to engage participants in reacting to this topic.<sup>5</sup> The one-time, in depth SKYPE interview with the female filmmaker Kaouther Ben Hania in July 2018 about film *Beauty and the Dogs* focused on her motivation for making the film, her involvement, if any, in the early years following the 2011 revolution, and her notions of what role art contributes to society. The information gleaned from this interview was used in developing the survey protocols.

## 2. The film

Ben Hania's award-winning film *Beauty and the Dogs*<sup>6</sup> addresses sexual violence on multiple levels. Ben Hania developed her fictional account from a real event that took place in Tunis in 2012 and that was later chronicled in the book, *Coupable d'avoir été violée (Guilty of having been raped)* by Meriem Ben Mohamed (pseudonym for the young rape victim). The storyline exposes female sexual and psychological violence in Tunisia in nine scenes of which eight were filmed in black and white; the act of rape is never depicted on screen. In the film, Meriem meets the mysterious Youssef at a student party. They are both physically attracted to each other and leave the noisy crowd to enjoy a romantic walk along the beach. A few hours later, the audience sees her walking the streets, screaming, disheveled and in shock. A long night ensues during which time she exposes her case to the police and medical staff, in the hope of being understood, believed, and provided with the help she desperately needed. She recounts how the "morality police" stopped the couple and interrogated her young male companion, Youssef, while she is dragged into the police vehicle and viciously raped. The arrogance, viciousness, and inhumanity of the police is such that, instead of finding support and immediate help, Meriem is accused of indecent exposure and moral turpitude – an archaic, patriarchal remnant of Tunisia's social code law.

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<sup>5</sup> This important design decision was based on feedback from a 2018 pilot study, the authors' previous research experience in Tunisia, and extensive knowledge of Tunisian culture.

<sup>6</sup> Prix Luminaire 2018 for best francophone film. Also selected for Cannes film competition 2017, and the Tunisian entry for pre-selection for best foreign film, Oscars 2019.

And so, as it has long been the case for women globally, the accuser becomes the accused.

### *Field research*

The field research consisted of a three-step investigative process during the summer of 2019: a film screening, a post-viewing survey, and small focus group interviewing<sup>7</sup> with women and young girls from the southern cities of Mahdia and Sfax, Tataouine, and the smaller towns of Chebba, Jbenyena, and Ghourmassen. The methodology that underpins this phase is grounded in audience reception theory (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003). First popularized in the 1970s and 1980s, audience reception studies emanated from the early work of Paul Lazerfield et al. (1944), Robert Merton (1946), and Cooper and Dinerman (1951). These early studies shifted the media research paradigm. Instead of focusing on the content and structure of media messages, they centered on audience's use and gratification of media during the viewing experience, having theorized that background experience among viewership influences interpretation of the message in ways that accentuate feelings towards the victim and/or the accused.

The 101 female participants voluntarily attended the film screening and responded to research protocols, assisted by members of local branches of women-focused non-governmental organizations who had extended the invitation by email and word of mouth to participate in the study.<sup>8</sup> The decision to limit the study to only females was made based on our previous work with women-oriented NGOs whose experience has emphasized that sexual violence is an emotionally charged topic and difficult to approach even in a single-sex group environment; our goal was to create a setting that would encourage open discussion as much as possible. Participants were asked to complete the post-viewing survey and given the choice to complete it in French or Tunisian Arabic, which was followed by their participation in small focus group discussions. Each of the 14 groups was

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<sup>7</sup> Each protocol was field tested in July 2018 with the help of graduate students at the University of Sousse School of Law and Political Science. Thirty-six women participated in the pilot study and adjustments to language and types of questions were made.

<sup>8</sup> The six NGOs included La Voix de la Femme and TheNational Union of Tunisian Women (UNFT) in Mahdia, UNFT-Chebba; Mouwatinet in Sfax; The Association for the Protection of Women and Children in Jbenyena; Nour and the Association of Human Rights Association in Tataouine; and Festival in Ghourmassen.



comprised of two to ten participants, who could join a focus group conducted in French, English, or Tunisian Arabic based on their language preference.<sup>9</sup>

Part one of the survey gathered general demographic information and background experience. Participants were asked if they self-identified as feminists, had any prior knowledge of the real story of Meriem, or had already seen the film. They were also asked about the state of gender-based violence post-2011 and if they agreed with the classification of the four dimensions of gender-based violence as defined by the United Nations.<sup>10</sup> Part two of the survey queried their individual reactions to the film; specifically their reactions to the protagonists and staff of the institutions represented in the film; and concluded with questions about their renewed personal agency to tackle gendered violence in their own communities. The 45-60 minute, focus group interview sessions began by eliciting general reactions to the film, which set the stage for more open-ended probes about the state of gendered violence in their communities and their opinions about the latest national efforts to curb the violence in the public sphere and at home, and the challenges in raising young girls and women's awareness of their rights.

### 3. General Findings

#### *Ben Hania Interview*

Three important themes emerge from the interview with Kaouther Ben Hania: 1) storytelling as the principal driver of her creative processes as a

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<sup>9</sup> The few women who were illiterate were paired with a research assistant (RA) and completed the survey orally. The Tunisian Arabic groups were led by a trained research assistant whose native language was Tunisian Arabic, and the transcriptions later translated into English. Each RA also had to complete the online CITI course on Human Subject Research at <https://about.citiprogram.org/en/homepage/>

<sup>10</sup> Based on the United Nations Assembly adoption of the *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (A/RES/48/104). The 1993 Declaration defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." Since then, there have been additional UN entities that have included economic framework to evaluate gender-based violence.

filmmaker; 2) film as an art form; and 3) fictional adaption of true events on screen.

Storytelling: Ben Hania considers herself, first and foremost, a storyteller. Although she self-identifies as a feminist saying, “After all *feminist* is not a bad word” and greatly appreciates the work feminists’ activism through the years, she was never part of a political group or women’s organization. She also underscores that her goal in making film is not purposefully political, it is about “creating characters who tell a story that evokes emotion.”

Film as art: According to Ben Hania, “A filmmaker cannot be hesitant when depicting especially controversial or difficult plots.” She says, “You cannot worry about the reaction from society. You have to believe in your movie; it takes up to three or four years of your time.” What she sees as a greater challenge to the creative process is doubt. You are often asking yourself, “Will I be able to finance this film? Is the scene good?” “Doubt,” she says, “is inherent in the creative process.” She believes that her talent lies in being capable of creating emotion on screen and has been particularly touched by the reactions of women during film screenings. She recounted, “At least one woman in every screening was seen crying, and often women approached me, telling me [about] their own life’s experience.”

Screen adaption of true events: She expressed her amazement at the strength and courage of the real Meriem after reading her book. However, Ben Hania was emphatic about the fictional nature of her film; the only aspect of the film resembling the original story was the crime of rape. Through her film and loyalty to her film making technique, she sought to evoke emotion by creating a story of “a superhero who is just an ordinary girl who had not much experience in life, and how this type of tragedy [rape] can change you and what you can discover inside.” Queried about the reason why she did not represent the actual rape scene in the film, she responded, “There are many rape-revenge movies, especially coming out of Hollywood. I was not interested in re-creating this type of violent spectacle. I am more interested in the subtler institutional violence. It is a question of taste and cinematic choice.” As she also points out, “No one witnesses the act of rape but for the victim and the rapist. When it comes to legal action, it is her word against the rapist’s, and the victim is always where the doubt lies.”

*Post-viewing Survey*

The age range of the survey sample (N=101) was from 11 to 63 years old, with an average age of 34.7 years, s.d.=12.6. Thirty percent were students; 46% reported working outside the home; 26% identified as housewives; and 4% identified as housewives or students and also working outside the home. Thirty-eight percent were married; 49% single; and 13% widowed or divorced. Seventy percent self-identified as feminist vs. non-feminist. When queried about what constitutes gendered violence, almost all participants identified physical attacks (hitting, beatings, slapping) (94%); sexual harassment and rape (97%); and verbal abuse and psychological manipulation (87%) as acts of gendered violence. However, only 48% of the sample considered economic manipulation (by family members or in the workplace) as gendered violence.

Participants were also asked if they thought that the situation regarding gendered violence in Tunisia had improved since the revolution; 76% thought that women were more vulnerable to acts of violence after the revolution; 15% did not, and 9% were unsure. Similarly, 62% thought that more women had been subjected to specific acts of violence post-2011, 17% did not, and 21% were unsure.

Part two of the survey probed participants' reactions to the film, and included questions about the individual behavior of the protagonists (Meriem and Youssef) and the medical and institutional actions of the police, the staff at the public hospital and private clinic. These questions were followed by others that queried the potential for this film to harm Tunisia's public image at home and abroad and to inspire their own activism.

More than 85% of the participants reported that neither Meriem nor Youssef was solely responsible for the situation in which they found themselves. That figure dropped slightly to 78% when asked if they thought that they were jointly responsible. Over 90% believed that Meriem was right in pursuing her press charges against the police. A greater number of participants reported that the institutions acted inappropriately; 99% reported that the police had overstepped their authority during the interrogations with Meriem, and slightly less (93%) with Youssef, the latter whom they felt was impacted by his prior activism (86%). Similarly, the participants indicated that the medical examiner should have reacted more

firmly against the intimidating actions of the police (90%), and the policewomen should have been more supportive to Meriem (93%).

Regarding the general impact of the film nationally and internationally, almost all participants (95%) reported that the film shed light on an important social problem that is often hidden or ignored by the population. Slightly fewer (78%) indicated that the film cast an unfavorable spotlight on the country, with a similar portion of the participants (72%) reporting that it left them frustrated after the screening. On the positive side, they reported having more sympathy for women who are victims of similar acts of violence (98%), becoming more aware of the different ways that individuals and public servants react to gendered violence (95%), and being more willing to participate in programs and/or actions that address gendered violence (89%).

Additional analyses were conducted to ascertain if significant differences existed between the participants based on their demographic information and background experience. It should be noted that since the distribution of the continuous variable *age* showed that participants fell within two distinct age ranges (11-34 years) and (35-63 years), we created two categorical *age group* variables, *younger* and *older*. Using Pearson's Chi-Square and Cramer's *V*, significance tests were conducted to reveal if age (*younger* or *older*) was associated with background experience and post-viewing reactions to the film and the strength of the relationship.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, significance testing was conducted to determine if any association existed between background experience and post-viewing responses. Background experience variables solicited *yes/no responses*. Affirmative statements about the film offered three response options: *agree*, *disagree*, and in some instances, a third choice, *I don't know*.

Important differences between demographic and background variables. There was no difference by age group for women who self-reported as feminist. However, for women who identified as non-feminist, there was a significant difference by age group. More younger women self-declared as non-feminist than the older cohort  $\chi^2(1) = 4.123$   $p < .05$ , Cramer's *V* = .208. There was no measurable difference between the younger vs. older cohorts

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<sup>11</sup> Note that we set the significant level at  $p < .05$ . We designated the strength of the significance using Cramer's *V* as outlined in these values:  $> -.2$  = weak;  $-.2$  to  $+.2$  = small to moderate;  $+.2$  to  $.3$  and above = strong.

with regard to the four dimensions of VAW but other background variables showed moderate significant differences in their views of gendered violence. Women who worked outside the home identified economic manipulation as a form of violence more than women who did not work outside the home  $\chi^2 (1) = 6.182 p < .05$  Cramer's  $V = 2.50$ . Self-declared feminists tended to view post-revolutionary Tunisia less safe for women than non-feminists. The former group felt that the female population was subjected to more VAW post 2011  $\chi^2 (1) = 8.841 p < .05$  Cramer's  $V = .303$ . Civil status (married, single, widowed or divorced) showed no significant difference when tested against the four dimensions of violence.

*Differences between demographics/background experience and film interpretation*

There was no significant difference between the younger and older participants' reactions to the protagonists' responsibility for their circumstances. Neither age cohort felt that Meriem and Youssef were responsible either individually or jointly. Similarly, age was not a factor in participants' reactions to the medical examiner and the police. Both age cohorts felt that the police interrogators overstepped their authority and that the medical examiner should have acted more firmly against the intimidating actions of the police. There were also no significant differences among women who self-identified as *housewife, student, feminist or not*, with regard to these same film variables although our testing suggests that a larger sample may provide different results.<sup>12</sup>

Whether or not participants knew of someone who was a victim of physical, sexual, or psychological violence, did not show any significant differences in how they reacted to the protagonists. Overall, previous media exposure to Meriem's story, either through social media, television, or at the cinema, was not significantly associated to women's post-viewing reaction to the film's protagonists. However, there was some indication that the women who had not previously seen the film tended to support Meriem's right to press charges. Additionally, some participants who had

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<sup>12</sup> In some of the tests 50% of cells showed less than expected cell size count, but reported p-values of  $< .05$ , particularly between women who work outside the home and those who do not and their reaction to the main protagonists; and students and non-students and the reaction to the medical examiner.

learned about the story through other media sources also felt that activism played a negative role in how the police treated Youssef, and police had abused their power when dealing with Meriem and Youssef.<sup>13</sup>

#### *4. Focus Group Discussions*

The discussions were initiated through three general thematic prompts: 1) reaction to the film, protagonists and institutions; 2) opinion about the state of VAW in pre- and post-revolutionary Tunisia; and 3) possible recommendations or suggestions for change.

All sessions were recorded, and transcriptions were generated and analyzed to categorize similar and/or contrasting reactions within the themes, which are reflecting in the following quotes by themes.

##### *Reaction to the film*

The general reaction to the film was positive:

“It delivered a message that I didn’t care about before or rather I didn’t even think about.”

“It spoke about something that is not spoken about in the media, which is rape. It has also an interesting message which is how a woman becomes strong and seizes upon her rights...it’s important to believe that, even if there are obstacles. You have to stand tall and face them yourself.”

At the same time, there was a feeling of frustration.

“I have no desire to see the film again. I was frustrated. It’s a film to see only once.”

“It was shocking to see this woman treated like an animal.”

“I was frustrated. I was disappointed in the reality. I was not really happy with the ending. I wanted to see something that would solve the problem.”

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<sup>13</sup> Small cell size prevented us from concluding that these findings were significant but suggest a trend that could be studied further based on Pearson’s Chi-square value < .05.

*Reaction to the protagonists.*

The reaction to rape victim was mixed. Comments on Meriem's dress and poor decision-making were raised in almost every session.

"I was frustrated by Meriem's personality. She could have been stronger, surer that it was the right thing to do [press charges]."

"She did not have the right to go out with a stranger. She should not have dressed as she did."

"I really blame Meriem since any normal person who will find her at night on the beach with such a sexy dress will take advantage of that [behavior] and rape her."

"She deserves what happened to her because she was wearing an indecent dress."

"I felt from the very beginning that she was controlled by her girlfriends in the way that she dressed, putting on make-up and all."

"Her clothes were disrespectful. She is a student who is supposed to go to Tunis to study, not to go out at night with her boyfriend. She is the reason for the entire problem."

Contrasting views, show more compassion and support for Meriem than for Youssef.

"I sympathize with her because she was violated by the police; true, she was dressed indecently, but she didn't deserve to be raped."

"Being decently dressed or not is not a good reason to rape a woman."

"She is a victim, not a criminal"

"I don't agree with xxx's opinion that blames Meriam for the way she was dressed. We are back to the old and narrow-minded thoughts that see women as عورة (sexual objects). She is a young lady who needs to be free to do whatever she wants."

Reactions to Youssef were more nuanced.

"Youssef mishandled the situation, but he tried to help. His fight was with the corrupted State. His background was as an activist...They were going to use everything in his police profile against him."

"He was defending a cause. He was promoting his personal activism."

“Youssef was so negative. He wasn’t strong enough to defend her.”

“I sympathize with Youssef because he stood by her until the end though he had a bad history with the authorities and until the last moment, he told her not to back down and pursue charges against rape.”

“Youssef seemed to have more experience than her [Meriem], a political experience as he had been an activist before the revolution. He is not women’s enemy and so I am happy to see that he resisted and had the rapists punished.”

*Reaction to institutions and their representatives.*

Stronger negative reactions targeted the State, the police, and the medical staff, but the harshest reaction appeared to be directed at the female characters other than Meriem.

“I was particularly shocked by the women in the film. The policewoman, and the nurse at the private clinic. They didn’t stick up for each other. They left her.”

“The women in the film were obstacles for her.”

“I can imagine the reaction of males in the movie in real life, but it’s hard to accept that women would act like that. I was shocked and frustrated...I cannot find any explanation for this behavior. At the very least, she would have expected this kind of support, like ‘we will protect you.’”

“All national institutions made me feel frustrated starting with the health institutions that did not stand by the victim’s side, and the security institutions. I felt like the indifference of the top authorities had filtered down to the behavior of the institutional staff.”

“This type of story is common; people who are appointed to posts of power arbitrarily without having the necessary qualifications.”

“The story of the film is depressing and sad especially when we see how the police acted and misused their authority. They never consider the woman [Meriem] as their mother, sister or daughter.”

“They deserve more [punishment] because they misused the authority given to them and they raped that girl. They are supposed to protect us not to harm us. They deserve 50 years not 15 years due to their job as police officers because they betrayed the country.”



*Reflections on the state of VAW in pre- and post-revolutionary Tunisia*

Two key points emerged during the interview sessions related to the effectiveness of Law 58 and the inherent patriarchal mindset in Tunisian society. Some women expressed frustration about the application of the new law, giving very specific personal stories, and examples of the obstacles that impede its application.

“I know that the relationship between police and citizens are better than in the past... but I know of incidents where the police stalk vulnerable women who want to make a complaint against their husband. They always start making her feel ill-at-ease by asking intimate questions concerning her sexual relationship with him.”

“One day at almost midnight, the police called me concerning a 12-year old girl whose father tried to rape her and they asked me to take her with me since we do not have any emergency shelter where she could stay. I was afraid because her family knows where I live so I took her to stay with my friend. That poor girl told me that the police had tried to silence her by offering her 10 dinars if she would back home and forget about the case.”

“The image of bad cops and how they hurt people and run with it was mainly dominant before 2011, but after what happened (actual rape incident), I think that there is more awareness since then. I am not saying that there are no bad cops anymore but I think people have started to ask for their rights and speak up.”

“Slowly but surely things [VAW] are getting better. It is always a problem of awareness and the way we deal with it. We made a revolution to make things better. It has been eight years and we are still struggling with the law [Law 58] and we are not prioritizing the resources to raise awareness.”

“People are not really aware of what is going on with the legislative branch and the new laws; they exist but they are not being applied out there. Violence should be a national cause just like terrorism. It needs to be addressed urgently.”

At the same time, there were comments that directly spoke to the patriarchal mindset and the social taboo of speaking about sex and sexuality generally.

“The thing about the laws is that on the ground, it is so different. ...Women usually feel so much pressure from their family, their husbands and society itself. Women should not be judged. The problem is not with the laws but with the people.”

“I think there is still work to be done about mentality. First of all, there was a lot of opposition to the new law...and there is even the moral taboo. Women do not want to talk about this [rape].”

“We are raised in a patriarchal society. Men have power and authority. They have the right to control women: how they should dress, when and where they may go. Society is responsible for this. Even those who have had a good education, who have been raised differently and who have lived abroad suffer from this mentally.”

“Society is unfair to her [women]. That is why men think that power is physical and they have access to it because of the social and religious norms.”

“In Tunisia, there is confusion between religion, tradition, and morality.”

“The question of female rape is true, but there is another story which is happening in other aspects of social life where the question of sexuality is taboo...we mishandle judging sexual crimes, and from my point of view [jurist] we have begun to normalize these crimes.”

### *Proposed solutions to VAW*

Ideas ranged from sex education in schools and more awareness campaigns and listening centers in the communities.

“Violence needs to be a national cause just like terrorism. It needs to be addressed urgently. Raising awareness can happen mainly through TV shows and publicity because it is accessible and can easily catch individuals’ attention. Advertising must insist on women’s rights.”

“Denouncing violence against women should be a school subject that should be taught from primary school on, and it should be as important as other subjects such as mathematics or physics and with every session we need to dig deep into social behavior and discuss reality. We also need to create a police department that deals with violence like the new one that deals with the environment.”

“We mustn’t always prevent a girl from talking about rape or sexual relationships because it is *haram*, a sin.”

“We must create listening centers for these women to be listened to by other women in order to help and sensitize them.”

“We must raise girls and boys equally. But unfortunately, in our society children grow up under repression because parents fail to teach them honesty that comes from trust and honest discussion with their children. For example, had Meriem been brought up in that way, she would have called her father and asked him for the permission to go to her university party.”

## *Discussion*

Film maker Ben Hania's capacity to create the story of "an ordinary girl" struggling to find justice resonated with the female audiences who participated in this study. Ben Hania's intent in making the film was not political, as she said. Nevertheless, the way in which these female audiences digested the plot accorded them the opportunity to express their opinions on a range of social and political issues about the state of VAW in their country. The survey responses to the fictional representation of Meriem's journey provided a snapshot into their initial reaction about the film and VAW generally; the focus group interviews revealed the source of these views and generated rich discussions.

At every session, the emotions provoked by the film were visibly evident. Participants were seen debating among themselves about their survey responses, which carried over to the focus group interactions. What has become evident in connecting the quantitative and qualitative investigations, is that women across all age groups, and of diverse political leanings, felt that people in power positions have a moral responsibility to protect women and are not doing a good job.

The sense of female solidarity was ever present in each session. Women, young and old, believed that Meriem did not deserve what happened to her regardless of her behavior. Furthermore, they were united in their opinion that people in positions of power who abuse their power are more reprehensible than any kind of behavior exhibited by a VAW victim, such as what was depicted in the film. There was also a clear sentiment that women must unite to fight against VAW; relying on men or the State (which many considered dominated by a patriarchal mindset) to make change will not resolve the problem. This reaction aligns with survey responses that showed the participants' disapproval of the way the policewoman and gynecologist treated Meriem.

The 70% of self-identified feminists who did not cast blame on Youssef might also have accounted for the mixed, nuanced views about his behavior during the interviewing sessions. Could their views about equality influence their reactions, or could their own proclivity for activism inspire a more sympathetic view because they know or appreciate men like Youssef? Or did this kinder view of Youssef resonate with women who clung to the traditional view that men are expected to protect women?

These questions cannot be answered from this study but could be part of a future research study that examines differing notions of feminism that may exist among Tunisian women, and what factors may influence those notions.

Almost all women acknowledged the positive impact of the reforms made to the *Penal Code*, but they also acknowledge that further work is needed in the field to protect women against all odds, particularly with regard to unchanged mentalities and patriarchal laws. How they envisioned the way forward reflected their socio-cultural proclivities. While almost all the participants wanted to see more education on sexual harassment, not all supported sex education in the schools. Sex education should be a family affair. The difficult irony was that the younger cohort who saw the film mentioned that talking about sex and sexuality was not a conversation that they could ever have with their mothers or other female family role models, and even less with their father or brothers, preferring to talk with their peers. Even then, it was not always an easy exchange. The same group felt that discussions about physical or sexual violence can happen more readily in a family setting, initiated as a result of seeing VAW in a TV program. So, there was an apparent consensus, especially among the younger cohort, that media can play an important role in raising awareness about VAW. One focus group suggested developing televised publicity campaigns. They also suggested distributing Ben Hania's film as a TV series in nine segments during Ramadan, when families are often at home and watching television together.

One of the most surprising findings from this study had to do with the perception of economic manipulation (at home or at work) as a type of gendered violence. Although so many women self-identified as feminists, more than half of the participants did not categorize economic manipulation as VAW, generally considered a major dimension of VAW by international agencies working on behalf of women. Is this gap another indicator of the differences in how Tunisian women perceive feminism? It is notable that many Tunisian researchers have repeatedly identified poverty and economic disempowerment as barriers to women's equality throughout their work. While this study was not designed to examine this gap, it does offer yet another avenue for research.

## *Conclusion*

Efforts to address gendered violence in Tunisia did not begin with the real story of Meriem and her battle with the legal system to find justice. Nor did it begin with the public release of Ben Hania's film in Tunisia in 2014. Women's groups and civil society have been working for years to raise awareness and bring about more gender-sensitive legislation that would address this important societal reality. Unfortunately, President Ben Ali's politics of obfuscation in order to enhance a country's international image during his 30-year tenure undermined many of these efforts. The 2011 Revolution of Freedom and Dignity changed all that by making some of the more shocking socio-economic conditions of women, particularly in the rural regions of the country. At the same time, women activists and organizations seized upon the renewed hope that change could happen. Since 2014, progress has been made from the legislative perspective. However, the reality on the ground shows a disturbing picture. This study demonstrates through the voices of women, VAW remains a very real problem that is impacted by socio-cultural mores that remain a dominant influencer on the application of law. At the same time, we note the dynamic solidarity that unites women in their battle to eliminate VAW. While progress is slow, we have been witnessing some headway in recent months. Following an incident in Nabeul on October 10, 2019, when a high school student captured a well-known local politician Zouhair Makhoul on video, masturbating outside her high school and shared it on social media, she unknowingly unleashed Tunisia's "Me, too" movement #EnaZeda (Tunisian Arabic for Me, too). Today, more than 25,000 Tunisian women have joined the EnaZeda Facebook page. In early November 2019, the government agency CREDIF (The Centre de recherche, d'études, de documentation et d'information sur la femme), launched a public campaign to address sexual harassment in public transportation and encouraging witnesses to come forward ("Tunisie: des centaines de manifestantes," 2019). Given the history of women's activism in Tunisia, these kinds of very public initiatives will continue in an era when censorship no longer chokes the voices of women.

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