

## Between individual thinkers and women's associations: an overview of the "female issue" during the first half of the French protectorate in Tunisia

Entre pensadores individuales y asociaciones de mujeres: un repaso por la "cuestión femenina" durante la primera mitad del protectorado francés en Túnez

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### Abstract

In Tunisia, the role of pioneer of the feminist movement has often been granted to scholar Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād, who wrote a very controversial book on women's emancipation. However, he was not the first person to contribute to the "female issue", as it came to be known. Other intellectuals had already been paving the way for reform and there were certain women's associations working towards inclusion. In this paper, we will present an overview of the contribution that both individual thinkers and women's associations made to the emancipation of women during the first half of the French protectorate in Tunisia.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Colonial Tunisia, Women's associations, Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād

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## Resumen

En Túnez, el papel de pionero del movimiento feminista suele ser atribuido al pensador Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād, quien escribió una controvertida obra sobre la emancipación femenina. Sin embargo, no fue la primera persona en contribuir a la “cuestión femenina”, como acabaría siendo conocida. Otros intelectuales habían estado preparando el terreno para la reforma y había algunas asociaciones de mujeres trabajando por la inclusión. En este artículo presentaremos un resumen de la contribución que tanto de intelectuales individuales como estas asociaciones hicieron a la causa de la emancipación femenina durante la primera mitad del protectorado francés en Túnez.

**Palabras clave:** Feminismo, protectorado francés en Túnez, asociaciones de mujeres, Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād

## Introduction

Tunisia is often credited with being at the forefront of gender equality in the Arab World thanks to a policy of ‘state feminism’ enshrined in the Tunisian Law of Personal Status, implemented shortly after the country gained its independence (Bessis, 1999; Murphy, 2003). This law, passed in 1956 by president Habib Bourgiba, was the first of its kind to ban polygyny and repudiation in the Arab World and made reality some of the better-known pleas for female emancipation that scholar Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād (1899-1935) had rallied for. Al-Ḥaddād, a man whose life was marked by his activism as a Muslim reformer and a nationalist, is often thought of as being the main source of inspiration for said law as well as the pioneer of feminism in the country (Ḥammāmī, 1999). However, he was not the first Tunisian to call for a social reform that would better the lives and rights of women, as there were a handful of prominent proponents before him who had already brought attention to issues such as their lack of access to education or certain cultural customs that were depriving them of their Islamic rights regarding issues like marriage or inheritance. This article does not intend to uncover new significant insights, but rather pull together relevant historical developments and arguments in a new, succinct manner in order to provide an overview of the “female issue” during the first half of the French protectorate in the country.

## Gender issues, reformism and the nationalist movement in colonial Tunisia: an overview

During the years prior to the establishment of the French protectorate, a large number of reformists were striving for a complete social revamping that would transform Tunisia from an underdeveloped country to one slowly progressing into the future, as was the case of the minister Jayr al-Dīn Bāša (1820-1890) or the politician Aḥmad Ibn Abī Diyāf (1804-1874). The former served as inspiration for almost all reformist movements in the future and paved the way for the country’s first nationalist party, the *Jeunes Tunisiens* (*Ḥarakat al-Šabāb al-Tūnisī*), founded in 1907. He was an apprentice of the latter, a respected historian who helped in the codification of Tunisia’s first constitution, the Fundamental Pact (*‘Ahd al-Amān*) of 1856. Aḥmad Ibn Abī Diyāf published a sizeable number of works, including a detailed description of the Tunisian society at the time and even a *Treatise on Women* the very same year of the publication of the Fundamental Pact. Despite being a reformist and insisting in the need of the betterment of the lives and rights of minorities in the country, such

as the Jewish people or immigrants from other (often European) nations, his *Treatise on Women* was surprisingly traditionalist and presented a rather archaizing view of gender roles and stereotypes against women. His own pupil, Jayr al-Dīn Bāša, refused to comment on the matter and did not suggest, that we know of, any account of reform on that matter, which can only lead to two possibilities: either none of them thought that female emancipation was needed, therefore believing women should be left out of any reform, or they were too focused on other aspects of society that were more pressing, in their opinion. Another possibility, as Julia Clancy-Smith suggests, is that this was a strategy to avoid unnecessary heated debates around their ideas, fearing this might affect the popular opinion on the reformist movement as a whole, hence posing a threat to the enforcement of the Fundamental Pact, which was way more important, according to them (Clancy-Smith, 2010).

As such, we can ascertain that there was little advancement in the issue of women's rights in the time preceding the French protectorate. However, as early as 1905 saw the publishing of one of the first books questioning the *status quo* and calling for a reform in this and many other fields. Thus, the common belief that we have to wait for World War II to see any real action being taken in this realm is rendered false, as there were many attempts to draw attention to the status of women who took place way earlier than that. 'Abd al-Azīz al-Ṭa'ālbī (1876-1944), who would later found the *Dustūr* party, alongside a few colleagues, published in Paris a book called *L'esprit libéral du Coran* (*The Liberal Spirit of the Qur'an*) whose objective, in line with the guidelines of the buoyant Muslim reformist movement or *salafiyya*, was to demonstrate that the holiest text of Islam, the Qur'an, was revealed to mankind with the intention of its teachings to be updated and adapted to society at all times whenever needed (Benattar et al, 1905). The book dealt with a variety of situations in which reform was needed and pointed out that the source of the underdevelopment of most Muslim societies had nothing to do with Islam itself, but instead was caused by the stagnation of religious interpretations as well as the additions that had been made to the original and core ideas revealed by the Qur'an to its believers. For example, those cultural practices that, despite having been forbidden by Islam, had continued to exist due to society's reluctance to outlaw them or those that had been given a religious background and were considered to be sacred albeit having no real links to the Qur'an.

As was to be expected, one of the areas the book pointed out as needing some serious reforms was the status of women in the country. Despite not elaborating too much on the subject, al-Ṭa'ālbī and his coauthors objected to the imposition of the veil, stating that it was a custom that never appeared in the Qur'an and that the holy book itself rejected in certain aspects, such as while praying or during pilgrimage (Benattar et al, 1905: 11-18). Although *which* type of veil is not mentioned in the book, we must understand that they referred to the *integral* veil, the one that covered women from head to toe, leaving only a small opening for the eyes if at all, concealing their whole bodies and faces. Another issue regarding women that is addressed in *L'esprit libéral du Coran* had to do with the social, but not religious, hence, exogenous tradition of seclusion, one that had crept in in Tunisia's society as well as many other Muslim ones and had come to be associated with the Qur'an's commandments. The authors here alleged that this tradition was contrary to the word of the Prophet and to the very words revealed by God in the Qur'an and that it had a cultural background, not a religious one, hence it should be abolished. One of the examples they gave to proof their point of view was that the Qur'an allowed women to inherit from their family as well as administer their own fortune and real estate, but seclusion rendered them unable to do any of those two things. Seclusion also deprived them of access to healthcare and posed problems for them when they were

‘dutifully supervising their underage children’ (Benattar et al, 1905: 21). This alone was enough to demonstrate that seclusion had no legal value, was not a religious obligation and, in fact, was preventing women to partake in the rights given to them by the holy Qur’an.

This example shows that the issue of gender equality or, at least, the need of implementing reforms to the legal and social fields regarding women was being debated at the time and was present in the minds of reformers and the religious milieu. It comes as little surprise, particularly if we take into consideration that ‘the female question’, as it came to be known, was receiving all kinds of attention in the whole Arab world at that time. Particularly important in terms of Muslim reformism, it was a core topic of interest for renowned scholars such as Ŷamāl al-Dīn al-Afgānī (1839-1897) and Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905). Both of them would regularly write articles about the issue in his journal, *al-‘Urwat al-wuṭṭa* (*The Firmest Bond*). Tunisia was the first country of the Maghrib to receive the influence of their thought thanks to a visit the latter paid the country in December 1885. ‘Abduh was received very coldly by the majority of the conservative religious environment, but with real expectation by most of the students of the mosque-university, Zaytūna. The reformer paid Tunisia a second visit in 1903 only to be received in the same manner as before, mostly because of his views against sufism and maraboutism. Al-Ṭa‘ālbī himself was one of ‘Abduh’s follower and took part in a number of campaigns to end the popular adoration of ‘Muslim saints’ (marabouts), which was very well established in the country and had, as the latter had pointed out, no religious background (Ende, 1995: 901).

Alongside al-Afgānī’s and ‘Abduh’s work to include ‘the female question’ in their agenda as reformers, some of the most groundbreaking books of the time on the issue were written by one of their collaborators from the journal, the Egyptian Qāsim Amīn (1863-1908), whose works became known in Tunisia and helped frame the debate on gender equality in the country, greatly influencing the feminist movement later on. In 1888 the first of the two books regarding the issue were published. It was titled *Taḥrīr al-mar’a* (*The Liberation of the Woman*) and was followed in 1900 by *al-Mar’a al-ḡadīda* (*The New Woman*). The first of the two was meant for the Egyptian public and aimed at awakening popular conscience about those social practices and institutions that were discriminatory against women and that were profoundly rooted into the collective imaginary, such as the veil, seclusion, the harem or polygyny. As was to be expected, he received fierce criticism from all types of people, some of them alleging he was writing from an orientalist point of view or that he sounded like the very same colonizers Egypt was fighting against at the time (Ende, 1995: 901).

However, it was precisely thanks to the great uproar the work caused that the issue of gender equality and the emancipation of women transcended its traditional realm, the bourgeoisie, and became a topic of interest for all society (Fruma & Halevi, 2015: 18-19). The second book was as much a follow up of the first one as a means to counter the criticism it had received by further deepening and explaining the theories and ideas Amīn wrote about in *Taḥrīr al-mar’a*. *Al-Mar’a al-ḡadīda* demonstrates that the author was an ideological successor of the *salafiyya* movement, because it centers around the need to combine the ‘Western modernity’ with Islam’s teachings, giving this last one the renovating interpretation it should have had in order for religious traditions to be on par with the current times. Amīn’s works clearly influenced the Tunisian debate and we can be sure that, regardless of how he came to read them, Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād knew about them, which helps us understand just how important Amīn’s ideas were for the feminist movement in the country (Kirū, 1986: 27).

Some researchers, such as Sonia Ramzi-Abadir, consider that the colonial period is characterized by stopping or slowing down the social changes and transformations of the status of women in the country, still relegated to a position of ignorance and to the background during a time of nationalist

struggle. Ramzi-Abadir seems to believe this is a common, ontological issue, a dynamic that takes place in any colonial context, in which the main goals are the fight against the foreign oppressor and the achievement of national independence and in which all other social issues remain secondary so as not to distract the attention (Ramzi-Abadir, 1986: 39). This presupposes that the colonial system automatically paralyzed any internal change in colonized societies, something with which we respectfully disagree. We believe that what often happens is that the official narrative emphasizes, once independence has been achieved, the past struggles of the nationalist movement, virtually silencing all other aspects of resistance that undoubtedly took place during the colonial era, leading to a partial account of history that leaves marginal voices outside, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak alleged (Chakravorty Spivak, 2011: 39, 52). In the case of Tunisia, it is true that during those times the intellectual and political debates *between men* regarding the emancipation of women usually had more voices in favor of 'waiting until independence had been achieved', but this does not mean there was no progress in the matter, as shall be pointed out in the remaining of this article (Bessis & Belhassen, 1992: 29).

## Revisiting Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād's role as cornerstone of feminism in Tunisia

Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād is often credited as being the pioneer of feminism in Tunisia thanks to his famous book *Imra'atu-nā fī l-šarī'a wa-l-mu'ytama'* (*Our Women in the Islamic Law and Society*), published in 1930 (Borrmans, 1977: 124). Al-Ḥaddād, a Zaytuna graduate, was a scholar and nationalism advocate who often published journal articles about issues of great social impact, such as the naturalization law of 1923 or trade unionism (Bessis, 2003: 50-62). He was born in Tunis in 1899 to a middle-class, conservative family and came into contact with both nationalism and reformism during his time as a student of the great mosque, where he was scouted by independentist leaders to join the *Dustūr* (Ḥaddād, 1984: 17). Upon the return to the country of a good friend of his, Muḥammad 'Alī al-Ḥammī, he became interested in the life conditions of the working class and began to write articles on trade unionism. Al-Ḥammī and al-Ḥaddād, together with some other acquaintances, struggled to establish the first autonomous trade union central in the country, for the only one in existence before it was the *Confédération Générale des Travailleurs*, a French one (Tlili, 1978: 73). Thus, they founded the *Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens*, often known by its acronym, CGTT, to help galvanize the workers' struggles to better their conditions in and out of their jobs. The nationalist party did not see under good light the CGTT, for they deemed it too big a confrontational force against the protectorate, whom they sought to cooperate with instead of eliminate, and so al-Ḥaddād decided to leave the *Dustūr* (Majed, 1979: 71; Lelong, 1962: 34; Bazāz, 2009: 48; Weideman, 2016: 49). However, his nationalist activity was far from being over and he continued to write articles on relevant issues in a number of journals of the country.

After the CGTT was dismantled by the French government and most of its leaders were sent to prison or exile, al-Ḥaddād's focus switched from trade unionism to women's rights and he began to write articles on this issue and composed a notorious book, the aforementioned *Imra'atu-nā*. The book itself was far from being revolutionary in the whole sense, for it used Qur'anic quotes and examples of the Sunna to back the thesis that Islam was not the cause of the many problems that Tunisian women were facing at the time, but rather that men had interpreted the religion in a way that perpetuated their gender hegemony. As such, he was very much in line with the thoughts of

most Muslim reformers such as the already mentioned *salafiyya* founders ʿĀmāl al-Dīn al-Afgānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh. It advocated for a new interpretation of the sacred texts in order to eradicate all of the social practices and cultural customs that were added to Islam afterwards and that resulted in both a distortion of the original message and the continuation of practices contrary to women's rights. However, it successfully dealt with issues which were not being discussed by other Muslim reformers or even feminists in the Arab world at that time, such as inheritance laws or the need to include physical education as a compulsory subject for women in educational curriculums. Most of the other issues dealt with by the author in *Imra'atu-nā* are somewhat common to what other activists were rallying for, such as the elimination of the veil, the end of polygyny, the irreligious custom of secluding women and the need to abolish repudiation and to establish a national and universal educational system for both boys and girls.

However, despite the author's attempt to prove that his thought was backed by the correct interpretation of the Qur'an, he was faced with great criticism as virtually every conservative *'ulamā'* was against him and even many members of the nationalist elite opposed his point of view (Lelong, 1962: 34). As such, the scholar suffered from a huge discrediting campaign that costed him his Zaytuna degree and barred him from holding any public post in the future (Lelong, 1962: 34). This, together with serious health problems possibly related to the enormous amount of stress he had to cope with, led him to a premature death in 1935 (Weideman, 2016: 50).

*Imra'atu-nā* is divided into two main sections, one regarding the consideration of women in Islamic Law and another one on social practices that consolidated the marginalization of women, like marriage traditions and access to work. It was banned shortly after its publication and it was not put back into circulation until 1978, despite its influence being present even during the draft of the Tunisian Law of Personal Status (1956) (Ḥammāmī, 1999: 79). As such, from 1960 on it received much attention and a number of articles exploring its contents and the author's other works began appearing.

The key concept of the whole book is that there are 'transitory measures' in Islam, which figure extensively in the Qur'an, whose objective was to change some social aspects that could not be radically changed by Islam's revelation (Hernández-Justo, 2021). As such, he argued that God and the Prophet had devised a series of 'transitory measures' that would ensure that Muslims gradually eradicated certain aspects of their day-to-day life and substituted them by what God truly commanded (Ḥaddād, 1999: 13). Taking slavery as an example, the author applied this theory to issues regarding women's rights, such as the unequal inheritance laws, polygyny and repudiation, and tried to compel the idea that such discriminatory laws were not supposed to be in force forever, but that each Muslim had to make a voluntary effort (*ijtihād*) to understand what to keep and what to change. As such, he concluded that the inheritance laws should be changed to grant any descendant the same rights over their family's inheritance, regardless of gender, that a man could not marry more than one wife at a time and that, taking into consideration that God was said to abhor repudiation, it should be entirely eradicated (Ḥaddād, 1999: 29).

His idea that polygyny was actually forbidden by God lay in the fact that the Qur'anic verses related to it stated very clearly that the condition for such a thing to happen was that the husband had to be completely just with each wife. Yet at a later point in the Holy Book, it was said that no man was ever going to be just. As such, he interpreted that the condition to be able to involve in polygyny was impossible, hence the practice was impossible too (Hernández-Justo, 2016: 139). He also believed that men were abusing their authority and the rights granted to them by the Qur'an in terms of repudiation, by making use of the triple repudiation formula, which was clearly forbidden by the scriptures, and that it constituted a huge discrimination towards women. Understanding that a new, better way to dissolve a marriage had been invented, he argued that traditional repudiation,

understood as a husband's right to unilaterally terminate his marriage to his wife, should be eliminated and that the modern variant, divorce, should be established instead (Hernández-Justo, 2016: 140). He stated that divorce, which was a legal procedure by which any of the spouses could ask a judge to terminate the marriage, was far more in accordance with God's idea of breaking a marriage than repudiation, for it was more just -and Islam was a religion of social justice (Ḥaddād, 1999: 77).

He also questioned the usefulness of veiling and seclusion, arguing that both should be abandoned because they clashed with certain laws of Islam, such as women's right to access their real estate and manage it, and that they limited their freedom of movement, which had little to do with the Qur'anic message that, from a civil point of view, all sexes (men and women only in this case) were equal before God. After demonstrating that the use of the integral veil could not be derived from any Qur'anic verse, he concluded that it corresponded to the stagnation of cultural practices that had been given an Islamic background by '*ulamā*' in order to control women (Ḥaddād, 1999: 173, 177-178) and advocated for its banning.

Of course, these and some of the other issues he dealt with in the book did not align with the conservative elite in his society, who targeted him for his 'revolutionary ideas' and accused him of being 'Westernized', as we shall see more of later on. However, if one analyzes the contents of the book and contrasts them to those of other works by Muslim reformers of the time, it is obvious that al-Ḥaddād was not that far from their thought and that only some of his theories were revolutionary or innovative -such as those regarding inheritance, for instance. Due to the revival of research about him and his books in the 70s and 80s, when parts of the world were experiencing a new wave of feminism, many Tunisians believe he was the pioneer of the movement in Tunisia. However, as we shall point out in the next part of this article, he was not the first person to advocate for women's rights and there had been women before him who had tried to push forward reforms on some of the very same fields al-Ḥaddād wrote about in *Imra'atu-nā*.

## **Women's associations as vectors for social change and female emancipation: the crossroad between nationalism, Islamism and communism**

Some of the main problems women in Tunisia were facing at that time had a juridical root whereas others were cultural issues. With regards to the first field, it is important to note that in this period there were a variety of courts active in the country, ruling in accordance with either the nationality or the religious confession of the people involved in the trials. Some of them took care of general trials, whereas others were specialized in more grave matters or in specific areas such as trading or land tenure. In this sense, most of the legislation relating to Tunisian women came directly from Islamic courts, where the *šarī'a* was applied, or rabbinic ones, which ruled over anything involving Jewish women in the country. This was all part of the French colonial politics, which sought the support of the conservative local elites in order to consolidate its presence in recently conquered territories.

As a result, the laws of personal status that had been in force in the decades before the establishment of the protectorate kept being enforced, with little or no alterations at all, throughout most of the colonial period (Bessis & Belhassen, 1992: 24). Researcher Maurice Borrmans points out that, in fact, Qur'anic courts were not homogeneous when applying the current legislation, especially when it came to matters in relation to personal status. The cause of this situation laid in the fact that there were differences regarding adherence to *madāhib*: though most of the Tunisian population was usually of *malikī* adherence, there were a handful of minorities that followed the *hanafī madhhab* (Borrmans, 1977: 15). As such, there was no unified juridic standards of universal applications that ensured that all Tunisian women were equally treated by law (Chaouachi, 1997: 191). It is easy to understand the multiple problems such a system would imply, especially if we take into consideration that it fomented disparity amongst women from the same nation simply in accordance to their religious adherence and that such a disparity was officially institutionalized. Furthermore, women were legally considered to be under male guardianship throughout a series of laws which institutionalized a social practice of cultural roots which was being understood as sacred due to certain Qur'anic interpretations (Charrad, 2001: 28).

However, most of the dilemmas that women were facing at the time had more of a social origin than they had a legal one, meaning they were linked to social customs that had ended up becoming institutionalized to a certain degree. Such was the case with the obligation of wearing the integral veil, a practice that was not established as compulsory or even implied or written about in any law, but that was being imposed by society. The tradition was so engraved in people's minds that it soon came to be considered as part of the Tunisian national identity, to the point that nationalist leaders of the time were adamant to keep it insisting that its abolition would bring about the dissolution of the very identity of Tunisia. There are some examples of social uproar caused by incidents related to the use of facial veils. For instance, in 1925 a young Muslim woman whose mother was French was given the title of 'queen' of the local feasts and decided to attend them without it. As a result, there was a roaring journalistic campaign against the situation in which both the conservative elite and quite a handful of nationalist leaders participated, some of them insisting in the fact that women should not appear in any public situation and, in the case of the former, even stating that this was an act of lack of moral and of deviation and perversion. Some went as far as to imply that it was the result of instructing women, which made them vulnerable to acculturation and moral decline (Bessis & Belhassen, 1992: 28). The young Habib Bourguiba joined said criticism saying that unveiling favored the French colonization and positioning himself 'categorically against its elimination' (Salem, 1984: 149). In the end, both the traditionalists and the nationalists systematically opposed the implementation of reforms in this area or, at least, insisted in the need to leave them out of the debate until the country had obtained its independence (Hijab, 2011: 22-23).

Issues regarding women's rights and female emancipation were not entirely new in the country, for the official journal, *al-Rā'id al-tūnisī*, had, since its foundation in 1860, already been offering news of the feminist movement around the world and, most especially, in the United Kingdom (Borrmans, 1977: 124). In 1924, as part of the propagandistic agenda of the periodicals *Tunis Socialiste*, dependent on the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO), and *al-Nahḍa*, of the reformist party, a considerably large campaign in favor of the abolition of the use of integral veils took place. That very same year a lady appeared in public without covering her face. Her name was Manubiyya el-Wertani and she was a somewhat well-known activist on the subject, which was popularly known as *sufūr* (literally meaning 'unveiling'). Some say she was the one to set the precedent for the aforementioned issue of the festivities of the city of Tunis. Some years later another activist, Ḥabība Menšari, incorporated to her mission the outlawing of polygyny, which she considered a must in order to advance and progress as a whole nation (Pérez Beltrán, 1991/2: 304).



Despite all of this, most of the work that was being conducted in the field came from a handful of individuals brave enough to question the *status quo* and some scholars who were debating the issue in closed circles. Larger, popular action had to wait until a little later, when the first women's associations of the country were founded. Thanks to the relative political openness brought upon Tunisia in the 1930s, women could join forces to take action and reclaim both private and public spaces they had been barred from before. However, none of these organizations were of mixed gender, which deepened the customary sexual segregation, and most of them had an informative character, mostly for their own members, or were dedicated to charity -both of these fields traditionally associated with women.

The first women's association to be founded in Tunisia was *l'Union Musulmane des Femmes de Tunisie* (UMFT) thanks to Bašira Ben Murād (1913-1993), who stepped forward to create it in 1936. Technically, its aim was to unite women, educate them and spread among them all kinds of issues related to culture. The UMFT soon had a spin-off especially catered to young women and girls, called *Union des Filles de Tunisie* (UFT). Ben Murād was the daughter of Muḥammad al-Šāliḥ ben Murād, a teacher at the mosque-university of al-Zaytūna, just like her grandfather, which enabled her with a vast understanding of the cultural and historic Arab-Islamic background, which she wanted to pass on to the rest of the women in her association. One of her father's main arguments as a teacher was that the Qur'an not only encouraged, but made instructing women an obligation, both from the moral and the religious points of view. By encouraging her daughter to found the association as well as supporting her many endeavors, al-Šāliḥ ben Murād ended up making more than one enemy in the religious milieu, but he nevertheless persisted on it (Abdelmoula, 1971: 155). The very same arguments both father and daughter used to refute those who opposed their ideas would later help many other families to stand against public opinion when they decided to grant their daughters education, for both Muḥammad and Bašira regularly published articles on the issue in the journal Muḥammad edited, called *Šāms al-islām* (*The Sun of Islam*).

It is a little bit surprising that this 'unconditional support' from father to daughter came from a man of a very conservative background whose daughter was breaking all kinds of stereotypes and fighting for female emancipation. Furthermore, it is paradoxical, to say the least, if we take into consideration that al-Šāliḥ ben Murād would later write a book entirely dedicated to refuting and criticizing Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād's groundbreaking ideas for female liberation, some of which were clearly in order with what Bašira thought and tried to spread through her association. His own daughter had to defend him years later insisting that, just like the majority of other independentists of the time, her father considered national liberation a priority and thought that if female emancipation took all of the public's attention instead of the anticolonial struggle, the issue could stagnate or, even worse, there was a high risk that conservatives and detractors to women's rights would accuse its activists, as it happened to Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād himself, of being allies of the French and promoting the dissolution of the national Tunisian identity. She also stated that her father thought, after interpreting al-Ḥaddād's infamous work, that it was the result of the 'Westernization of the author', a mere reflection of the ideas and way of thought of European feminism, and that it did not take into consideration the local reality of the country (Marzūqī & b. al-Ḥājj Yahyà, 1963: 82).

We have previously stated that the UMFT aimed to spread cultural awareness and to instruct women, at least, in theory. In practice, however, the association was a nationalist platform as well as it was conceived as a mean to involve women in the fight against the French colonization, for Bašira Ben Murād was very interested in politics and was a well-known independence activist

(Bakalti, 1996: 76-78). The association was dissolved in 1956, but its short-lived existence gave light to some very interesting soirees which, under the guise of women's reunions, were actually meetings to plan out the national liberation. For example, only a week before it was officially founded, Ben Murād was inspired by a previous experience by some members of the Dustūr and decided to bring together a number of bourgeois women, among them Tawḥīda Ben al-Šayj (1909-2010), the first female physician of Tunisia, to organize a popular party with the intention to earn money for the nationalist cause.

Along both associations, Ben Murād was also the founder and editor of a journal called *Tūnis al-fatāt*, whose first issue was published in 1938. To that end, she was inspired by the impressive role set by the Egyptian feminist Hudā Ša'rāwī, whom she greatly admired. The same year of the founding of such a journal, whose aim was to spread the intentions and activities of the UMFT, Bašīra Ben Murād and a handful of other members of the association, alongside some children, actively participated in a nationalist rally headed by the independentist leader 'Alī Balhawān. To further demonstrate her point of view towards both nationalism and female emancipation, Ben Murād herself stood beside him during the whole meeting, a very revolutionary fact that appeared in most local journals for days (Šabbī, 1982). She, of course, did so without covering her face.

Tawḥīda Ben al-Šayj, who had joined the UMFT from its very beginnings, was also a very well-known activist for women's rights. Thanks to the patronage of a French bacteriologist and his wife, Ben al-Šayj's mother, who was a widow, finally convinced her maternal family to allow her daughter to go to Paris to study medicine, after having been the first Muslim woman of Tunisian nationality to obtain the degree of bachelor (Clancy-Smith, 1998). From then on, Ben al-Šayj became a referent for female education in the country, to which she returned after graduating in France. She established a private clinic for the poor and was an expert in pediatrics, but ended up specializing in gynecology due to the massive affluence of poor women who turned to her for help with problems related to undesired pregnancies and other issues of sexual health (Sadiqi et al, 2009: 155). Right from the time Ben al-Šayj joined the UMFT as well as throughout the rest of her life, she became a very respected activist for female emancipation and most specifically in favor of reproductive rights. She campaigned on during the 60s and 70s as a leading member of the abortion-rights movement, which was finally won in 1973. Ben al-Šayj was one of the first experts to instruct other Tunisian physicians in abortive techniques (Sadiqi et al, 2009: 156).

The *Association des Jeunes Musulmans (Ittiḥād al-Ašbāb al-Muṣlīmīn)* also established a Feminine Section in the 1930s, although its background was much more conservative, particularly in those topics related to education. It was not opposed to female instruction, which they deemed a necessity, to a certain degree, in the framework of propagating good Islamic morals, but believed it should be restricted to only a handful of areas and always with the intention of preparing women for their 'role in society', it is, as mothers, wives and good Muslims (Marzouki, 1993: 47). However, there were clear converging aspects between both associations and so there were many women who were members of both of them at the same time. The Feminine Section managed to gather around three hundred women in its first official public act, a meeting to announce their intention of funding a new school for Muslim girls. The idea was that those who assisted to the meeting would contribute with new ideas on how to carry out this mission as well as with monetary donations to get the project started. This, together with charity sales and the generosity of personal contributors to the cause allowed the works to begin and the new school started functioning in 1944 (Marzouki, 1993: 57-58).

All of this takes us to the conclusion that one of the most recurring topics during the debates prior to the country's independence was precisely education. The need to establish a national educational system strong enough to help galvanize the nationalist struggle was present from before the actual

establishment of the French colonization, hence it was not a new theme. A little after the protectorate was enforced, *šayj* Muḥammad al-Sanūsī, father of the famous journalist Zayn al-‘Ābidīn Sanūsī, had published a book titled *Tafattuḡ al-akmām* (*Épanouissement de la fleur ou étude sur la femme dans l’islam* in French) in 1890 in which he advocated for female instruction (Bessis & Belhassen, 1992: 26). Most of the book is written from a conservative perspective, meaning it maintains the hegemonic Qur’anic interpretation of the era and justifies through the sacred text the persistence of certain cultural practices, such as polygyny or veiling (Essnoussi, 1897: 23-25). The author focused his attention on different fields of the Islamic law in which gender was a key point, aiming to explain the legal application of such laws and to demonstrate the perceived equity of the Qur’an with regards to the treatment due to men and women. To exemplify this, for instance, he stated that a person’s gender was not a determining factor when administering justice, for punishments derived from the seriousness of the crimes committed and did not rely on the gender of the offender (Essnoussi, 1897: 23).

However, the myriad of Qur’anic quotes and references to the Sunna allowed Muḥammad al-Sanūsī to argue that, considering that all moral and religious obligations were equal to both men and women, then women too had to ‘look for knowledge’ and emerge from ignorance (Essnoussi, 1897: 30-33). He thus set a timid precedent in the movement in favor of the educational reform, which grew stronger during the 20s and 30s, and helped to inspire a new generation of reformists and activists who, thanks to donations, were finally able to establish the first school for Muslim girls in 1900 (Clancy-Smith, 2000). The founders of the school had to face the rejection they received from religious authorities as well as that coming from the most conservative sectors of society, which did not relent even after the curriculum was announced to include subjects of Arabic language and Islamic religion, both of them imparted by teachers from Zaytuna mosque. They even had to fight against the public opinion of the French colonizers, who believed that the Tunisian people was too underdeveloped as a society as to be in charge of educating anybody and that, as such, the educational field should stay in French hands (Mahfoudh & Mahfoudh, 2014: 15).

The very renowned scholar and activist Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād, often credited with being the country’s first feminist, was one of the reformers who made a cornerstone of his thought out of female education, but he was not the only one. Zayn al-‘Ābidīn Sanūsī, whom we mentioned earlier, took advantage of the scope and public of the literary section of the journal he edited, *al-‘Ālam al-Adabī*, to amplify the voices in favor of the idea as well as to broadcast the different points of view regarding the issue (Majed, 1979: 182). As part of the narrative of the necessity of extending education to women or not, various perspectives converged and diverged, some very clearly influenced by either the *salafiyya* Islamic reformist movement or even Qāsim Amīn, a well-known Egyptian female emancipation advocate. Al-Ḥaddād’s, for example, was a mixture of the two. He saw education as an imperative need not only because it would fortify the Tunisian social structure against the colonizers or to allow women to join the labor force, something that was very much needed in order to modernize the country and achieve a more competitive economy, but also to warrant that the necessary changes would be made in fields such as the political, juridic and institutional ones (Charni Ben-Said, 1986: 110).

As we can see, for the most part the beginning of women’s associations in Tunisia had two main backgrounds: either nationalist or Islamist. However, by the 40s the situation had changed and a new age began for women’s associations. This time, it was very much linked to the communist ideology, which helped detractors of female emancipation further discredit the cause. This revival

was favored by the fact that the Communist Party was one of the few political parties of the country that allowed women to enroll. Hassine Raouf Hamza, for example, states that adding up both the central party and its feminine sections there were a total of around 500 women affiliated between 1945 and 1946 (Hamza, 1994: 89). In this case we can talk clearly about *feminism*, because the Communist Party had showed itself in favor of the it practically from its beginnings, adhering to the official manifestos of the III International regarding the 'female question'. The party often insisted that the communist message was one of absolute equality among every single human being, which most certainly implied equality between sexes, and also stressed that the liberation of the whole human race would never be complete if women were not progressing and free of all their chains (Abassade, 2015: 199). The first few militants of the Communist Party, often French teachers or Italian workers, helped spread feminist theories among the ranks of the party from its beginnings, actively fighting to make other comrades understand the importance of incorporating gender issues to their cause.

The number of female affiliates to the Communist Party increased significantly during World War II, period in which they were especially active due to the repression their male counterparts were subject to. That might help to explain why the first women's association linked to the party was founded right after the war and not before. It was the *Union des Femmes de Tunisie* (UFT), created on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1944, by a French hosier (Bakalti, 1996: 82). A year later a youth subsidiary was founded, called *Union des Jeunes Filles de Tunisie* (UJFT), whose objective was to draw in a younger public which, they thought, had specific needs. Both of the two associations were exclusively feminine and did not allow for men to enroll in them, as opposed to other associations also linked to the Communist party that operated in Tunisia. This in itself can be very puzzling, as some researchers have already pointed out, for it is contradictory with the ideals they sought to attain, but should be interpreted as a strategy to attract more local members to their ranks (Abassade, 2015: 203). In fact, in the beginning all of their affiliates were European women with the exception of a handful of Tunisian Jewish women, but there were no Muslim women among them.

Mustapha Kraiem argues that, in reality, both associations were actually the Communist Party feminine wings, despite never being described as such, and interprets as fundament to his theory that militants of the party systematically enrolled in either of the associations according to their age (Kraiem, 1997: 318). Another argument used to back such theory lies in the fact that the internal organization of both the UFT and the UJFT was a copy of that of the Communist Party, which was based on the foundation of cells or sections of each association in some of the most important cities of the country, such as Tunis, Sfax or Bizerte (Marzouki, 1993: 96-97). Its main axioms were the search of better conditions for women, independently of their religious adscription or national identity, but also to raise awareness of women with regards to their duties as members of society and of human civilization at large (Bakalti, 1996: 82). To that end, they published a couple of journals thanks to the funds of each association and to those given to them by the Communist Party: *Femmes de Tunisie* and *Jeunes Femmes de Tunisie*. These were the only publications in print at the time in Tunisian land that were completely edited by women and were conceived as a platform created by women to encourage dialogue, the rise of awareness and the amplification of their struggles, without the need for a male intermediary (Abassade, 2019). This original conceptualization of the journals reinforces the idea that they were, at least according to the information available to us at this point in time, the first purely feminist journals of the country and not only journals aimed at a female public.

Researcher Élise Abassade points out that one of the main differences of the ideology disseminated by these two journals as opposed to other journals intended for women was that the latter had a very concrete vision of 'the woman', in singular, as a mother and a wife, whereas the communist platforms insisted in the integration of women to the labor force, demanding the same salaries for

Tunisian and European female workers as well as between men and women (Abassade, 2019). Another issue Abassade argued throughout her study of the articles published in both of the communist journals reinforces the theory that, despite what could be expected of a communist party, the one in Tunisia was established with a nationalist ideal in mind, and not one of a global union of human beings across the world. Both *Femmes de Tunisie* and *Jeunes Femmes de Tunisie* dedicated many articles throughout their whole existence to insist in the need of freeing the Tunisian homeland as well as to defend themselves from those who accused their respective associations of internationalism solely based on the fact that they were of communist ideology. These accusations, often coming from the conservative elite and from socialist enemies, were actually quite farfetched since, as Abassade showed in her work, both journals advocated for the nationalist cause and deemed it a necessity in order to free every single woman in Tunisia.

However, we believe it is important to point out that despite the so-called 'goodwill' of their struggles and those of the communist feminists of the country, both associations showed, via their publications, that they were not completely out of the scope of the imperialist and orientalist ideologies. This becomes clear through the use of certain terminology of obvious colonial background, such as the use of the term 'indigenous' to designate the Tunisian population, or the use of the word 'Muslim' as a synonym of 'Tunisian'. What is even more, due to the almost absolute absence of Arabic speaking militants in either of the association and to the fact that all of the articles published in their journals were written in French by European women or those of European descent, the contributors often presented themselves as intermediaries or spokespeople between the 'Muslim women', very often stigmatized as being illiterate, when in reality not all of them were, and as interpreters of their needs and miseries (Abassade, 2019). Thus, we witness yet another case of usurpation of platforms and spaces of self-expression of subaltern subjects, in this case bitterly struck by intersectionality as we are dealing with Muslim Tunisian colonized women being oppressed by patriarchy and colonization as much as by the capitalist system. The journals in question, instead of becoming amplification platforms of the struggles of women in Tunisia, in general, ended up becoming an organism of propaganda of the orientalist ideology that confronted the 'us' (European women, culturally of Christian background, most of them French-speaking) against the 'them' (Tunisian, Muslim, Arabic-speaking and often illiterate women). The concept, which appears constantly, yet unconsciously, promotes the same colonialist thought that motivated the conquest of the country, against which the very founders and editors of the journals said to be fighting: a 'maternalistic' approach sustained by the need to deliver to *others* the feminist emancipation sought by the movement. As such, these *others* become silenced subjects who were never granted the chance to speak up and narrate their own fights, wishes and objections and are, instead, translated and interpreted under the communist point of view. Not once was there an opportunity for local women to voice their concerns and they were never asked about their innate worries, as they were directly assumed to be the same as the 'rest' of women in the country, as if women themselves were a monolithic, unique group and as if Tunisian, Arabic-speaking and Muslim women were too illiterate to share their own thoughts.

Perhaps all of this helps explain why some researchers seem to believe that the feminist movement in Tunisia was (and, to a certain degree, still is) eminently *Western-influenced* and that it emerged out of a desire to copy the same paradigms of female emancipation that were being defended in Europe at the time. Some authors even consider as factors of their origins 'the communist movement and its social impact in the country after the URSS had fallen', as if the only political ideology interested in the liberation of women was the communist one, thus eliminating from

history the struggles of all the *other* women, often nationalists and some Islamists, who were the true pioneers of female emancipation in the country (Za'fān, 2014: 131).

## As a conclusion

As we have stated, despite there being convergencies and crossroads between local reformists, Tunisian activists and the French and British feminist movement, the first two social groups had been struggling and working on the issue of female emancipation in Tunisia from long before the actual establishment of either women's associations or feminist organizations, and their fights were not following those of the feminist movements in Europe at that time. It is true that the proliferation of the latter somehow served as an example for local actors to push forward reforms of their own intern worries, but to consider them the base and role-model followed by Tunisian activists supposes, on the one hand, the ignorance of all the struggles previous to the introduction of European feminist theories in the country and, on the other hand, it demonstrates an orientalist perspective, almost paternalist from the point of view in which it argues that local fights were dependent on some sort of *fashion* imported from Europe, almost as if implying that the feminist movement would not have existed in Tunisia if it were not *thanks* to the French colonization. As such, even if it is necessary to thank communism for the grate impulse it made, throughout its two main feminist associations, to the issue at hand, it is even more necessary to point out that this ideology was not autochthonous as most of their militants were European, and that truly intern movements were being established in the country thanks to Tunisian women who decided to fight for their own future, challenging social norms and gender rules, often even from the juridic point of view, and with the help of male allies to the cause, such as the aforementioned Ṭāhar al-Ḥaddād.

It is undoubtedly true that the latter provided a serious background for feminist movements to back their theories and exigences. It is equally true that some of his claims were innovative and never seen before, such as those that dealt with the unequal inheritance laws of his time, for example. However, most of his areas of interest were the same ones that the *salafiyya* had focused on and some of them had already seen advances being made by women at the forefront of social change. Such is the case of the struggle against the veil, whose first local activist was a Muslim woman herself, and the same goes for polygyny.

Before we grant al-Ḥaddād the title of pioneer and first cornerstone of the movement for women's rights in Tunisia, we should also take into consideration the role women's associations played in the matter. These associations, led and integrated entirely by women, were at the forefront of social change by taking steps into the integration of women into the workforce or into the political, social and cultural milieu, whether such steps were big or small. We cannot forget the efforts put into the cause by all the women who contributed to, rallied for and made possible the opening of new schools for girls, the fight for equal wages between men and women or the right to leave their houses and go in public with their faces uncovered.

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