

# The Power of Bipartisan Mobilization: The Success of Tunisia's Feminist Movement During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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## Abstract

The Tunisian government, which is deeply divided, especially along ideological lines, responded to growing concerns over increased violence against women during the Coronavirus pandemic by establishing a new domestic violence shelter and 24/7 hotline. This article asks: *Why did the state respond to gender-based violence (GBV) concerns during the Coronavirus pandemic in Tunisia, despite ideological and political divisions?* We argue that the state addressed some concerns around violence during the pandemic because combatting GBV has bipartisan support in Tunisia. Tunisian Islamist and secularist women's rights organizations succeeded in building a bipartisan coalition of support on this issue because they worked either together in a short-lived coalition or in tandem with similar goals over the past decade during the democratic transition in Tunisia. Building on the existing coalition literature, we show that feminist coalition formation before a pandemic has implications for feminists' success in times of crisis.

## Keywords

Tunisia – women's movements – gender-based violence – COVID-19 – Coronavirus pandemic

## Introduction

COVID-19 or the Coronavirus pandemic has had dramatic consequences for people worldwide far beyond the direct medical effects. Scholars and activists warned about the spike in gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women, particularly during the Coronavirus lockdown, and forecasted the pandemic's negative impact on women in the Global North and South.<sup>1</sup> Calls to GBV helplines (or hotlines) increased five-fold in some countries as intimate partner violence increased while in quarantine.<sup>2</sup> In Tunisia, a country deeply divided along ideological lines, the government swiftly responded to increased concerns for women's safety during the pandemic.

Tunisia has fared relatively well during the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, with 8,546 reported deaths and 245,706 reported cases as of March 22, 2021 (or 2,079 cases per 100,000 people compared to 8,912 cases per 100,000 people in the United States).<sup>3</sup> Yet, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, including gender inequality.

Tunisia is puzzling because it has made progressive gender reform despite deep ideological divisions at the political and civil society levels. Secularists and Islamists disagree on Tunisia's identity, as they demonstrated during the highly controversial constitutional drafting process and in the final text of the constitution, which claims that Tunisia is both a Muslim country and a civil state. Yet, Islamist-secularist transitional governments have demonstrated their commitment to gender equality by passing remarkable legislation since 2011, including Organic Law No. 58 on combating GBV in 2017. Similarly, secularist feminists are deeply suspicious of Islamist feminists and see an Islamist threat to take over society and curtail women's rights. yet, they work with Islamists on some issues, including GBV, as we demonstrate in this article.

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- 1 This spike in GBV was not unique to the Global South. In the Global North, reported domestic violence increased by 30% in France and GBV-related calls increased by 20% in Catalan, since the beginning of the lockdown in March 2020. Tess Cagle, "Domestic Violence Statistics Are Surging During the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Nautilus* (2020). <https://coronavirus.nautil.us/domestic-violence-statistics/>; UNAIDS, "Gender-Based Violence and Covid-19—"When We Are Silent, We Allow These Crimes to Multiply" (2020); We use gender-based violence and violence against women interchangeably in this article to mean violence directed at women.
  - 2 UN Women, "Intensification of Efforts to Eliminate All Forms of Violence against Women: Report of the Secretary-General," (2020). <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/07/a-75-274-sg-report-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls>.
  - 3 World Health Organization, "WHO Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19) Dashboard," (2020). <https://covid19.who.int/>.

Despite passing progressive GBV legislation, the state has yet to implement all the reforms.<sup>4</sup> Like women across the region, and arguably worldwide, Tunisian women GBV victims remain vulnerable and unable to find justice. Though GBV was already a problem pre-pandemic, Tunisians saw a five-fold increase in reported GBV incidents in the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic (March–June 2020).<sup>5</sup> Women's rights organizations have been vocal about the gendered impact of COVID-19. Mass feminist mobilization has captured national and international attention, including the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU). Feminist activism has also led to the state's creation of a new domestic violence shelter and a 24/7 crisis hotline in partnership with the UN.<sup>6</sup>

Given the government's positive response, despite deep political and ideological divides, this article asks: *Why did the state respond to gender-based violence (GBV) concerns during the Coronavirus pandemic in Tunisia, despite ideological and political divisions?* We argue that the state addressed some concerns around violence during the pandemic because combatting GBV has bipartisan support in Tunisia. Tunisian Islamist and secularist women's rights organizations succeeded in building a bipartisan coalition of support on this issue because they worked either together in a short-lived coalition or in tandem with similar goals over the past decade during the democratic transition in Tunisia. As a result, the government could undertake reforms to address increased violence against women during the pandemic without much resistance, despite the ongoing political gridlock in Tunisia.

Feminist mobilization around violence against women predated the pandemic by 30 years, attesting to activist commitment and experience combating

4 Sarah Yerkes and Maro Youssef, "Coronavirus Reveals Tunisia's Revolutionary Gains Only Exist on Paper," *The New Arab*, June 22, 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2020/6/22/coronavirus-reveals-tunisias-revolutionary-gains-only-exist-on-paper>.

5 UN Women, "Press Release: Gender-Responsive Measures to Combat Covid-19 Urgently Needed to Preserve and Advance Tunisia's Progress on Women's Rights, Warns Un Women," United Nations (UN) Women (2020), <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/06/press-release-tunisia-urgent-need-for-gender-responsive-measures-to-combat-covid-19>.

6 UN Women, "Press Release: Gender-Responsive Measures to Combat Covid-19 Urgently Needed to Preserve and Advance Tunisia's Progress on Women's Rights, Warns Un Women," United Nations (UN) Women (2020), <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/06/press-release-tunisia-urgent-need-for-gender-responsive-measures-to-combat-covid-19>;

Hanaa AlSultany, " : " *Mosaique FM*, May 21, 2020, <http://tn24.tn/ar/article/r-bt-ln-khb-t-str-tgy-lldol-zmn-koron-adrt-b-lns-ohthh-tosy-tn-263456>; United Nations Development Program (UNDP), "Covid-19 Global Gender Response Tracker," 2020, <https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/>.

GBV in Tunisia. Before the pandemic, women's organizations lobbied the state, pushing the government to pass progressive gender legislation during the democratic transition (2011- current). Following the revolution, approximately 300 new Islamist and secularist women's organizations emerged.<sup>7</sup> While the women's movement remained divided along ideological lines, women's rights organizations, including secularist *l'Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* (ATFD) and *l'Association des Femmes Tunisiennes pour la Recherche et le Développement* (AFTURD), *la Ligue des Électriciennes Tunisiennes* (LET), *Beity*, *Aswat Nissa*, and Islamist *Tounissiet* all lobbied political parties, provided input on drafts of gender-related legislation and used foreign donor assistance to work on violence against women. LET and *Tounissiet* also formed a coalition that transcended their ideological differences and lobbied to end violence against women. Their separate and joint policy demands helped secure bipartisan support to end violence against women.<sup>8</sup>

This article has implications beyond Tunisia. We demonstrate that broad-based coalitions effectively garner political and societal support around an issue that lacked bipartisan support in the past. We also provide an example of a positive relationship between civil society and the state during democratization that can increase human rights and women's rights, particularly in this case.

The analysis proceeds with a discussion of our theoretical framework and methodology. In the findings section, we discuss feminist mobilization around GBV in pre-pandemic Tunisia to show that feminists have extensive experience advocating eliminating violence. We then discuss feminist mobilization around violence during the pandemic. Finally, we highlight the government's

7 Sarra Ben Amara and Ibtissem Mathlouthi, *Étude Sur Les Associations Ouvrant Pour l'égalité Des Chances Entre Les Femmes Et Les Hommes En Tunisie* (Tunis: CREDIF, 2012). Page number ?

8 Jane Tchaïcha and Khedija Arfaoui, *The Tunisian Women's Rights Movement: From Nascent Activism to Influential Power-Broking* (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2017) page number?; Tanja Scheiterbauer, "Women's Rights in the Aftermath of Tunisia's Revolution: New Options and Constraints for Women's Activism in Processes of Transition," in *Negotiating Normativity*, eds., Dhawan N., Fink E., Leinius J., Mageza-Barthel R., (New York: Springer, 2016) 147–158; Khedija Arfaoui and Valentine M. Moghadam, "Violence against Women and Tunisian Feminism: Advocacy, Policy, and Politics in an Arab Context," *Current Sociology* 64(4) (2016):637–653; Rangita De Silva de Alwis, Anware Mnasri and Estee Ward, "Women and the Making of the Tunisian Constitution," *Berkeley Journal of International Law* (2017) 35:90; Maro Youssef, Meriem Aissa, and Suzie Abdou, "Women's rights have improved in North Africa, but the struggle continues," *OpenDemocracy*, January 25, 2021. [https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/womens-rights-have-improved-in-north-africa-but-the-struggle-continues/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+opendemocracy+%28OpenDemocracy%29](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/womens-rights-have-improved-in-north-africa-but-the-struggle-continues/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+opendemocracy+%28OpenDemocracy%29).

response to feminist demands during the pandemic. We conclude by providing policy recommendations for all major stakeholders in Tunisia.

### Social Movement and Feminist Coalitions

This article builds on the social movement and gender politics debates on coalitions. We do so to identify specific factors that likely pushed the government to respond positively to concerns over increased violence against women during the Coronavirus pandemic in Tunisia. We contribute to the gender politics literature on coalitions by examining both exclusively secularist and Islamist-secularist GBV feminist coalitions. Filling this gap is essential for theoretical and feminist reasons as the study gives legitimacy and agency to all women actors—Islamist and secularist—in the Tunisian context.

Social movement scholars argue that certain circumstances like facing common enemies encourage cooperation, especially during moments of political uncertainty.<sup>9</sup> Studies highlighting the importance of common threats as a motivation for collective action are instrumental for understanding the Tunisian case.<sup>10</sup> In Tunisia, Islamist and secularist feminists led joint and separate efforts to eliminate violence against women, especially when facing common threats, such as increased violence since the revolution and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature falls short in explaining why Islamists and secularists would put aside their political and ideological differences to work together. The gender politics coalition literature helps answer this question by focusing on the nature of feminist coalitions.

Gender politics scholars are writing women into coalition studies by examining common gendered grievances that lead to feminist coalition formation but often focus on liberal feminist coalitions and ignore conservatives. The literature makes two significant contributions to coalition studies: (1) identifying a broad grievance by all women; (2) recognizing intersectionality as a strength

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- 9 Catherine Corrigan-Brown and David S. Meyer, "The Prehistory of a Coalition: The Role of Social Ties in Win Without War," in *Strategic Alliances: Coalition Building and Social Movements*, ed. Nella Van Dyke and Holly J. McCammon, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) 3–21; Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: a Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) page.
  - 10 David S. Meyer and Catherine Corrigan-Brown, "Coalitions and Political Context: U.S. Movements Against Wars in Iraq," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 10 (3) (2005):327–44; Nella Van Dyke, "Crossing Movement Boundaries: Factors that Facilitate Coalition Protest by American College Students, 1930–1990," *Social Problems* 50 (2) (2003):226–50.

and challenge of feminist coalitions.<sup>11</sup> Despite the timely intervention by gender scholars, feminist coalition research remains limited to primarily liberal and progressive coalitions.<sup>12</sup> These studies exclude conservative women's voices, leaving a gap in the study of women's collective action. Our research helps fill this gap by examining both secularist and secularist-Islamist coalitions around GBV issues in Tunisia.

Coalitions are necessary because different CSOs work together to elevate issues and give them visibility and credibility. When a broad-based group of CSOs forms a coalition around an issue, governments are more likely to address that issue and do it more quickly than when individual CSOs advocate around an issue.<sup>13</sup> When organizations come together, they pool human and financial resources to identify problems and elevate their concerns to the state.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, as the literature on gender quota adoption shows, even in places where significant international pressure to adopt women's rights reforms exists, governments are reticent to act without the pressure of a domestic coalition.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, coalitions play a crucial role in that they signal broad-based local support for an issue and propose locally derived and context-appropriate solutions that governments can adopt.<sup>16</sup> We extend these findings to the Tunisian case, which, as we will show, confirms that coalitions are important for building bipartisan support around an issue.

11 Anna-Britt Coe and Annette Schnabel, "Emotions Matter after All: How Reproductive Rights Advocates Orchestrate Emotions to Influence Policies in Peru," *Sociological Perspectives* 54 (4) (2001):665–88; Gretchen Arnold, "The Impact of Social Ties on Coalition Strength and Effectiveness: The Case of the Battered Women's Movement in St Louis," *Social Movement Studies* 10 (2) (2001):131–50; Joseph E. Luders, "Feminist mobilization and the politics of rights," in *The Consequences of Social Movements*, ed. K. Uba, L. Bosi and M. Giugni. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 185–214.

12 Myra Marx Ferree and Beth B. Hess, *Controversy and Coalition: the New Feminist Movement Across Three Decades of Change*, (London: Routledge, 1994); Jane Tchaïcha and Khedija Arfaoui, *The Tunisian Women's Rights Movement: From Nascent Activism to Influential Power-Broking*, (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2017).

13 Alice J. Kang and Aili Mari Tripp, "Coalitions Matter: Citizenship, Women, and Quota Adoption in Africa," *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no. 1 (March 2018): 73–91.

14 Sarah Soule and Brayden King, "The Stages of the Policy Process and the Equal Rights Amendment, 1972–1982," *American Journal of Sociology* 111(6):1871–909.

15 Alice J. Kang and Aili Mari Tripp, "Coalitions Matter: Citizenship, Women, and Quota Adoption in Africa," *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no. 1 (March 2018): 73–91.

16 Alice J. Kang and Aili Mari Tripp, "Coalitions Matter: Citizenship, Women, and Quota Adoption in Africa," *Perspectives on Politics* 16, no. 1 (March 2018): 73–91.

## Methodology

This article draws on ethnographic methods and content analysis to examine women's activism and the government's response to GBV concerns in Tunisia. One of the authors conducted dozens of in-person observations and semi-structured interviews with Islamist and secularist women's rights activists, state officials, and foreign donors before the pandemic in 2018 and 2019 in Tunisia and Washington D.C. We drew on interviews to establish pre-pandemic levels of cooperation.

We conducted content analysis of primary sources on the pandemic in Tunisia to understand feminist mobilization and state and donor responses to GBV spikes during the pandemic. We analyzed official government statements, global COVID-19 figures, UN public statements and reports on the Coronavirus, and statements and interviews by Tunisian women's rights organizations since the pandemic outbreak in Arabic and English. The data revealed that there is ongoing feminist mobilization during the pandemic. Furthermore, the data showed that the state and donors responded to feminist demands to address GBV during the pandemic in Tunisia.

## Findings

### *GBV Feminist Mobilization in Pre-Pandemic Tunisia*

Tunisian feminists regarded violence against women as a social problem dating back to the early 1980s. Secularist women's rights organizations conducted studies, signed petitions, formed coalitions, and set up hotlines and listening centers in the 1990s.<sup>17</sup> However, violence continued to increase despite feminist initiatives. According to a 2010 survey conducted by the Tunisian National Office of Family and Population, at least 47% of women ages 18–64 experienced one or more forms of violence in Tunisia.<sup>18</sup> Starting in 2012, secularist feminists formed a broad-based GBV coalition, according to LET founder Salwa\*

17 Khedija Arfaoui and Valentine M. Moghadam, "Violence against Women and Tunisian Feminism: Advocacy, Policy, and Politics in an Arab Context," *Current Sociology* 64(4) (2016):637–653; Khedija Arfaoui, "The Development of the Feminist Movement in Tunisia: 1920s–2000s," *The International Journal of The Humanities* 4(8) (2007):53–60.

18 Arfaoui and Moghadam, 2016.



LET and other women's associations created a coalition in 2012 in large regions across Tunisia to respond to women's demands on issues like gender-based violence. Then after the project evolved, we went to members of parliament with these demands. UNDP sponsored the events, and Peruvian and Colombian experts on development helped us develop a strategy.

The secularist coalition responded to GBV cases by adopting a mix of strategies that often resulted in justice for the victim. For example, they circulated Facebook petitions and carried banners that said: "state sponsored crimes" and "state sponsored violence" in 2012 following the rape of Meriem Ben Mohamed by two police officers.<sup>19</sup> In 2014, feminists demonstrated again in the streets and circulated Facebook petitions when the two officers and Meriem appealed their 7-year prison sentence. Meriem appealed the ruling, and a Tunis court doubled the officers' sentence, up to 15 years.

The nature of violence as a non-partisan issue led to joint Islamist-secularist efforts following the revolution. *Tounissiet* Vice President Yasmin\* explained that once donor workshop participants discussed their differences and knew one another after the revolution, they realized their differences were insignificant. She explained that their collective identity as women and feminists and common grievance around gender-based violence helped them recognize their similarities.

There aren't disagreements in women's civil society; for example, we cooperate on the anti-violence law.

Starting in 2014, secularist and Islamist women's organizations organized a 16-day GBV campaign. They used the slogan, "Behind every abused woman, there is a law."<sup>20</sup> LET and *Tounissiet* also formed one short-term Islamist-secularist GBV coalition. According to respondents, LET and *Tounissiet* briefly worked together on a European-funded project to combat violence in 2018, but their coalition dissolved within a year. Despite the coalition's collapse, the organizations continued to engage the state on violence separately but in very similar ways. Both organizations continued to draw on foreign donor resources, work with the ministries of women and health, and lobby secularist and Islamist politicians on eliminating violence. Their separate efforts continued to reinforce the message that violence impacts the lives of *all* women.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



In addition to working together, feminists also partnered with the state to provide social services and GBV awareness. In 2013, Tunisia adopted the National Action Plan for the Elimination of Violence against Women (NAPEVW), which requires the state to disseminate information, set up free hotlines, and increase access to comprehensive care for GBV survivors, according to respondents. Starting in 2016, *Tounissiet* partnered with CREDIF, a feminist state research institution, to raise awareness about GBV under the NAPEVW. Two *Tounissiet* members, Khedija\* and Hafidha\*, explained that *Tounissiet* partnered with the Tunisian state to develop studies on violence and launch awareness campaigns.

We worked with CREDIF several times, particularly on eliminating violence. Most of the time, it was awareness campaigns. This included handing out brochures in the streets. We talked about how it relates to the youth [young men], cultural influences...You stop people in the street and separate them from others and speak to them. You listen to victims, and you advise them. These are the things we participated in. As for big events, we sometimes held conferences or workshops.

Islamist and secularist women activists worked with the Ministry of Women on the 2017 GBV law and ensured that the state included the concept of political violence in Organic Law No. 58. According to respondents at the Ministry of Women and in parliament, activists provided input on several versions of the draft law that the Ministry of Women drafted. Activists also served as expert witnesses on gender-based political violence before several parliamentary committees tasked with evaluating the draft law they lobbied individual parliamentarians and parties on passing the law. They also briefed foreign donors and implementers, including OXFAM, who had the political capital to pressure the state to recognize political violence as a form of GBV, according to feminists and foreign donor respondents.

But GBV cases continued to climb even before the pandemic, due mainly to the lack of the 2017 law's implementation and lack of increased public awareness, according to respondents. For example, between 2016 and 2018, marital rape reporting increased from 7,869 cases to 40,000 cases annually.<sup>21</sup> While an increase in reporting could be a positive side-effect of increased awareness

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21 Yosra Frawous, “ : ,” [Frawous: Fakhfakh Left out Victims of Violence From His Statements Despite His Knowledge of the Numbers] *Mosaïque FM*, April 24, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4arqkUMnakY&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3CS4RtzkQO3isLoFpohHjQjircCHHOF26yk8by\\_A1IoQKAQVug0PnT8ow](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4arqkUMnakY&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3CS4RtzkQO3isLoFpohHjQjircCHHOF26yk8by_A1IoQKAQVug0PnT8ow).

after Organic Law No. 58 passed, the alarming numbers indicate that there could be an increase in marital rape, given the overall rise in violence against women. Feminists continued to engage the state on GBV due to the lack of implementation of Organic Law No. 58. In 2019, one of the authors attended a GBV conference where LET invited other secularist feminists, OXFAM, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Women representatives to celebrate their collaboration and stress the importance of implementing the 2017 law. They expressed their concerns about the lack of progress. Their ongoing efforts prepared them to engage on GBV once the pandemic reached Tunisia.

### *GBV Feminist Mobilization and Government Response During the Pandemic*

On March 23, 2020, the Tunisian government swiftly implemented a severe lockdown following the first cases of COVID-19 in Tunisia. The Tunisian government closed mosques, all non-essential businesses such as restaurants, sealed land and air borders and implemented a twelve-hour daily curfew in response to the global pandemic.<sup>22</sup> While these measures effectively kept Tunisia's COVID-19 cases down, violence against women increased by five-fold during the lockdown.<sup>23</sup> According to UN Women, Tunisians reported 40 acts of violence in one week in March 2020, compared to seven during the same period the previous year.<sup>24</sup> Between March and May 2020, government GBV hotlines received over 7,000 complaints, 1,425 of which occurred during the first month of the lockdown.<sup>25</sup> A Tunis domestic violence shelter received 350 women weekly during the lockdown, a four-fold increase compared to before

22 Reuters, "Tunisia Imposes 12-Hour Daily Curfew to Counter Coronavirus," March 17, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-tunisia-curfew/tunisia-imposes-12-hour-daily-curfew-to-counter-coronavirus-idUSKBN21443H>.

23 EuroMedRights, "Tunisia: Pandemic Increases Violence against Women," *EuroMed Rights*, June 2, 2020. <https://euromedrights.org/publication/tunisia-pandemic-increases-violence-against-women/>.

24 UN Women, "Press Release: Gender-Responsive Measures to Combat Covid-19 Urgently Needed to Preserve and Advance Tunisia's Progress on Women's Rights, Warns Un Women," United Nations (UN) Women (2020), <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/06/press-release-tunisia-urgent-need-for-gender-responsive-measures-to-combat-covid-19>.

25 UN Women, "Press Release: Gender-Responsive Measures to Combat Covid-19 Urgently Needed to Preserve and Advance Tunisia's Progress on Women's Rights, Warns Un Women," United Nations (UN) Women (2020), <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/06/press-release-tunisia-urgent-need-for-gender-responsive-measures-to-combat-covid-19>; EuroMedRights, "Tunisia: Pandemic Increases Violence against Women," *EuroMed Rights*, June 2, 2020. <https://euromedrights.org/publication/tunisia-pandemic-increases-violence-against-women/>.

the lockdown.<sup>26</sup> Finally, like abortion, access to birth control is essential during a lockdown in a country where at least 14% of women experience intimate partner violence. Still, women lost access to birth control during COVID-19 since hospitals prioritized COVID-19 concerns and could not see patients seeking birth control.<sup>27</sup> The increase in violence during the pandemic lockdown was not surprising to Islamist or secularist feminists since similar GBV spikes have occurred during holidays. During holidays, women are often forced to spend more time with their romantic partners at home; hospitals, shelters, and police stations either close early or operate at low capacity.<sup>28</sup>

Despite these trends, the prime minister and president were initially silent on violence against women during the pandemic. They failed to take proactive steps to protect vulnerable women when implementing the lockdown. Secularist and Islamist feminists vocally criticized the Tunisian government for refusing to take GBV seriously and ignoring the UN's urge to protect women during COVID-19.<sup>29</sup> According to activists, they also criticized the Ministry of Interior and the police's refusal to take women's complaints seriously and pressure them to return home when they file a domestic violence complaint.<sup>30</sup>

26 Yosra Frawous, " [Frawous: Fakhfakh Left out Victims of Violence From His Statements Despite His Knowledge of the Numbers] *Mosaïque FM*, April 24, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4arqkUMnakY&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3CS4RtzkQO3isLoFpohHjQjircCHHOF26yk8by\\_A1IoQKAQVug0PnT8ow](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4arqkUMnakY&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3CS4RtzkQO3isLoFpohHjQjircCHHOF26yk8by_A1IoQKAQVug0PnT8ow).

27 Hanaa AlSultany, " *Mosaïque FM*, 2020, <http://tn24.tn/ar/article/r-bt-ln-khb-t-str-tygy-ldol-zmn-koron-adrt-b-lns-ohthh-tosy-tn-263456>; UN Women, "Violence against Women Prevalence Data: Surveys by Country," 2012, [https://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/vawprevalence\\_matrix\\_june2013.pdf](https://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/vawprevalence_matrix_june2013.pdf).

28 Yosra Frawous, " [Frawous: Fakhfakh Left out Victims of Violence From His Statements Despite His Knowledge of the Numbers] *Mosaïque FM*, April 24, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4arqkUMnakY&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3CS4RtzkQO3isLoFpohHjQjircCHHOF26yk8by\\_A1IoQKAQVug0PnT8ow](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4arqkUMnakY&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3CS4RtzkQO3isLoFpohHjQjircCHHOF26yk8by_A1IoQKAQVug0PnT8ow); EuroMedRights, "Tunisia: Pandemic Increases Violence against Women," *EuroMed Rights*, June 2, 2020, <https://euromedrights.org/publication/tunisia-pandemic-increases-violence-against-women/>.

29 UN Development Program, "Covid-19: UNDP Urges Swift Action to Address Violence against Women and Girls During Pandemic," United Nations Development Program May 22, 2020, [https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2020/COVID19\\_UNDP\\_urges\\_swift\\_action\\_to\\_address\\_violence\\_against\\_women\\_and\\_girls\\_during\\_pandemic.html](https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/news/2020/COVID19_UNDP_urges_swift_action_to_address_violence_against_women_and_girls_during_pandemic.html).

30 Yosra Frawous, " [Frawous: Fakhfakh Left out Victims of Violence From His Statements Despite His Knowledge of the Numbers] *Mosaïque FM*, April 24, 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4arqkUMnakY&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3CS4RtzkQO3isLoFpohHjQjircCHHOF26yk8by\\_A1IoQKAQVug0PnT8ow](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4arqkUMnakY&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3CS4RtzkQO3isLoFpohHjQjircCHHOF26yk8by_A1IoQKAQVug0PnT8ow).

This indicates a more significant problem, where the authorities have failed to effectively implement the progressive 2017 GBV law due to a lack of political will or societal readiness for reform. Women's organizations condemned the Ministry of Justice's halting prosecution and review of GBV court cases during the pandemic. Finally, feminists were critical of the Ministry of Health's inability to provide violence survivors with birth control or access to 24-hour shelters.

In response to feminist mobilization, the Tunisian government has implemented some reforms to address the GBV pandemic during COVID-19. In April 2020, the Ministry of Women opened a new GBV shelter, specifically to address COVID-19 concerns, with the assistance of the UN Population Fund.<sup>31</sup> The new center provides victims with the option to self-quarantine for fourteen days before moving to a traditional shelter.<sup>32</sup> The High Judicial Council urged family judges to take all necessary measures to protect victims, guarantee their access to justice, and tackle violence against women and children, as two highly vulnerable populations during pandemics.<sup>33</sup> Tunisia has taken additional significant measures to address violence during the pandemic, including creating a free psychological support phone service for victims and extending the national domestic violence hotline hours to 24/7.<sup>34</sup> The Ministry of Women is also working with UN Women to raise awareness about GBV during the pandemic. The Ministry is creating two new videos and radio programming on GBV prevention, masculine behavior during confinement, and increased services available to women victims during the pandemic.<sup>35</sup>

While there is still significant work to be done, the government's decision to address some GBV concerns during the pandemic reflects the impact of feminist mobilization around violence, especially during democratization. GBV statistics were scarce in Tunisia before the revolution. The state often released GBV statistics once a decade, at most.<sup>36</sup> While violence has spiked since the revolution, data availability has significantly improved thanks to increased

31 Alessandra Bajec, "Violence Is a Virus": Tunisia Opens New Women's Shelter as Domestic Abuse Surges During Lockdown," *The New Arab* April 30, 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/4/30/tunisia-opens-new-womens-shelter-as-lockdown-violence-surges>.

32 United Nations Development Program (UNDP), "Covid-19 Global Gender Response Tracker," 2020, <https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/>.

33 Sarah Yerkes and Maro Youssef, "Coronavirus Reveals Tunisia's Revolutionary Gains Only Exist on Paper," *The New Arab*, June 22, 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2020/6/22/coronavirus-reveals-tunisias-revolutionary-gains-only-exist-on-paper>.

34 United Nations Development Program (UNDP), "Covid-19 Global Gender Response Tracker," 2020, <https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/>.

35 Ibid.

36 Arfaoui and Moghadam, 2016.

transparency and civil society efforts. CSOs have acted as watchdogs, gathering and publishing data themselves or pushing government agencies to publish official data. Much of the pandemic data in this article is based on CSO reporting. Women's organizations conduct their research and publish their findings in several languages through their reporting, donor reporting, op-eds, and research studies. Tunisian civil society regularly works with international partners, including the UN and Western human rights organizations, to raise awareness about their activities and the challenges women face during the pandemic. According to the organization's Facebook account, LET is working with its European partners to raise awareness about the issue through virtual events.<sup>37</sup> Finally, the state has directly addressed some of their concerns, highlighting their impact on policy outcomes—a vital feature of a robust civil society.

The success of women's rights organizations during the pandemic is even more impressive when compared to the challenges facing other marginalized groups. For example, LGBT rights groups in Tunisia have not been successful in pushing the public or state to engage on their issues during the pandemic. Violence against LGBT rights activists increased during the pandemic. The Tunisian Association for Justice and Equality (Damj) noted that their organization received five times the calls for legal help with arrests of LGBT people in 2020 as they did in 2019.<sup>38</sup> In February 2021, Rania Amdouni, a member of Damj, was arrested after going to a police station to complain about the harassment she received as a prominent LGBT rights activist.<sup>39</sup> Her arrest sparked public outcry and protests, but the LGBT rights community has not managed to attract the sort of cross-partisan coalition of support that women's rights groups have achieved.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Tunisia took some promising steps toward addressing increased violence against women because of the work CSOs had

37 Facebook: Ligue Des Electrices Tunisiennes. "Webinar on gender sensitive response to COVID-19" *Facebook*, July 1, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/LigueDesElectricesTunisiennes/photos/a.580368382032582/3035749166494479/?type=3&theater>.

38 Rasha Younes, "Kill Them They are Sodomites," *Nawaat*, December 8, 2020, <https://nawaat.org/2020/12/08/kill-them-theyre-sodomites-police-violence-against-lgbt-people-in-tunisia/>.

39 "Tunisia: Release prominent LGBTI rights activist jailed for insulting police," *Amnesty International*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/03/tunisia-release-prominent-lgbti-activist-jailed-for-insulting-police/>.

done since the 1990s and during the first decade of the democratic transition in building a bipartisan coalition of support on this issue. Groups from across the political spectrum worked together in a short-lived coalition or in tandem with similar goals during the democratic transition in Tunisia, building political and social support that paid off when the crisis hit Tunisia.

On October 29, 2020, the Tunisian government instituted a second nationwide lockdown and curfew as the country faced a second, much more severe wave of COVID-19 cases following the summer reopening. While the achievements of women's organizations, such as working with the government to establish a new shelter and a 24/7 hotline, are impressive, they are insufficient to protect women as they once again enter an incredibly vulnerable period. Women's organizations should continue to be vigilant and aggressive in pursuing further steps, such as the universal implementation of the GBV legislation, and work, as well as they can within the restrictive environment, to educate the public about the rights afforded to women. Women's rights groups could be more effective if they approach the Tunisian government as a united front, pushing the president and prime minister to work with them as advocates for better protection for women. To assist these efforts, the international community should recognize that combating GBV is a humanitarian consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and should be treated as such. Using humanitarian funds to support existing shelters, develop additional awareness campaigns in the media, and increase access for women to safe havens would help address this impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our aim is not to offer a total model that explains all the reasons behind GBV-related reform during the pandemic in Tunisia since there are several possible explanations. However, as a tactic and a strategy, we show how coalition work, and transforming an issue into a bipartisan one can be an asset for CSOs operating in polarized contexts. In that particular case, coalition work and bipartisan support can help CSOs come together and influence policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic will not be the last crisis that Tunisia, or the world, faces. Thus, the lessons of CSOs in Tunisia are essential for civil society in other polarized contexts. CSOs can garner broad support for their causes if they frame issues as bipartisan—particularly GBV, which does not discriminate between women based on their political leanings. CSOs can prioritize consensus-building as a way to achieve their current and future goals. As the Tunisian case shows, when Islamist and secularist women's organizations mobilized around GBV, they were most effective. Mass feminist mobilization helped translate the issue into a bipartisan one that impacts all Tunisians and helps them gain political support. Perhaps a divided women's movement could continue to adopt this strategy and secure additional rights for women in the future, leading to a stronger movement in Tunisia.