

ANTI-THESIS

Perspectives on Gender Studies at the Universities of Manouba and Sousse, Tunisia

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In Tunisia, the University of Manouba and the University of Sousse each offered a master's program in Gender Studies in 2019. This essay examines these programs' structures and foci, providing some comments on their contexts. Based on fieldwork including four expert interviews, this provides *one* limited attempt

to introduce readers to specific perspectives on and narratives about two Gender Studies programs.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Tunisia, Knowledge production, University, Institutions

Background information

I conducted the initial research project exploring instruction in Gender Studies in Tunisia in 2019. The research project was structured by four partly explorative expert interviews about Gender Studies in Tunisia. The initial framework of the research project was approached from a *white* queer*feminist theoretical perspective, using a qualitative content analysis as method.

Notes on positionalities

Today, I greatly criticize my initial research project, especially in terms of questions of situatedness and situated knowledges. I question and try to reflect the conceptualization of the fieldwork, my *whiteness* and the privileges I benefit(ed) from, and explicitly the Area Studies-driven theoretical, scientific practice that I followed and aimed for. For all intents and purposes, one should not unreflectively and uncommitted build an (academic) career on practices that play into the hands of or are based on (neo)colonial structures, ideas, theories, and methodologies. After due consideration, I decided that this is not what this article is primarily about. I still added important literature (of resistance) on topics connected to the aforementioned standpoints and considerations in my endnotes. I urge you to read this liter-

ature. From my recent perspective, I do believe that the interviewee's knowledge, their insights and their voices should and can be heard in this format - although the piece will always be tied to (my; a reader's; readers') white perspectives and contributes to (neo)colonial continuities, such as the uneven mobility of knowledge. Eventually, the piece was written in a participatory attempt and is published in recent cooperation and consensus with the persons I interviewed at the time. For questions and contacts, their email addresses are included in the endnotes.

Notes on Anti/Thesis

The Anti/Thesis section usually presents clearly contesting lines of thought about a specific subject. This is not so much the case for this article. Yet, the aforementioned structural and contextual problematic realities remain and should be further discussed, especially by the audiences of journals like META. So, I urge you to think about what I have tried to do with my slot in this journal. I invite you to like and dislike it. In my perspective, dealing with other forms of methodologies and theories can be a starting point, reflecting on one's own positionality can be a starting point, and stepping back from one's (conventional) work can be a starting point.

Failing and constant (un)learning *must* be starting points.

Affiliations

The research and the process were supported and attended by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's academic cooperation program *Independent Universities and the Promotion of Critical Research and Teaching* in the framework of a 6-month internship. The article was read and edited by the four interviewed scholars Prof. Amel Grami and Prof. Boutheina Ben Hassine (two representatives in the master's programs);¹ Prof. Monia Lachheb, a former teacher in the program at Sousse; and Naziha Ardhaoui, a (former) student in the master's program at Manouba.

About the interviewed scholars

Amel Grami is a professor of Gender Studies and Islamic Studies at The University of Manouba, Tunisia. Her research focuses on culture, society, religion and politics in the MENA region and the Middle East, as well as extremism, Peace Corps volunteering, women, and peace building. Grami founded the program at the Manouba University and can be contacted.²

Prof. Boutheina Ben Hassine is a scholar of history. Ben Hassine is specialized in the Umayyad and medieval period and

focuses on women in these periods. Ben Hassine founded the program at Sousse University and can be contacted, too.³

Prof. Monia Lachheb is a scholar in sociology. Lachheb focuses on the sociology of the body, gender and identity, and non-normative sexualities. Lachheb works on these topics mainly in the Tunisian framework, but also does research on Libya and Algeria. Lachheb is normally affiliated with the University of Manouba, but taught a semester in the master's program at Sousse. Lachheb works for the French institute IRMC (Institute de Recherche sur le Maghreb Contemporain). Naziha Ardhaoui was a master's student in the program at Manouba University in spring 2019. Ardhaoui studied English and Literature. So far, Ardhaoui has worked in training centers, sometimes for foundations. Ardhaoui's scientific interest is in comparative political sciences and media studies, approached from a feminist and Gender Studies perspective. Ardhaoui's master's thesis thus examines representations and the strategic medial use of women in the past electoral campaigns of Beji Caid Essebsi and Donald Trump. Ardhaoui has a major interest in qualitative research and fieldwork in Tunisia.

Structures and foci in the master's programs and surrounding contexts
Motivations, politics, and freedom of speech

Gender Studies has been taught in Sousse since 2017 and in Tunis, Manouba (Faculty of Literature, Arts and Humanities) since 2015 (Ben Hassine 3; Grami 8). Gender Studies are therefore situated in the broader post-2010/11 structures and realities of the country. The studies were established quite belatedly, in the opinion of one former professor in the master's programs (Lachheb 5). These formal establishments came well after the fact: Tunisian scholars look back on a long history of varying feminist interventions and projects (Lachheb 5; Antonakis 76, 105, 274).

From the moment when Gender Studies were institutionalized until recently, its master's programs and individuals working in the field have faced various kinds of political attacks (Ben Hassine 6-8; Grami 3, 11, 27). According to Grami, the increasing strength of conservative and religious politics and policies has an influence on the potential master's programs' finances and reputation and on the conditions and practices of freedom of speech (27).

Grami addresses the history and experiences of freedom⁴ of and restrictions on speech in Tunisian academia in relation to the former conditions of research and

freedom of speech in the Ben Ali period (3, 9), but also the possibility of using and doing Gender Studies as a field of studies in favor of democratic transition and practice. Before 2011, censorship and restrictions of academic freedom and freedom of speech were quite normalized (Grami 3). Gender Studies and gender-related research are therefore a strategic tool for supporting a democratic transition in the country in a sustainable vision (Ben Hassine 6). As such, Gender Studies can be considered one part of a project of dismantling censorship of and restrictions on freedom of speech (Grami 4, 15).

On a broader motivational scale, the interviewees' standpoints vary. As Ardhaoui points out, Gender Studies serves her as a tool for defending LGBT⁵ and minority rights and for fighting for equality and against the patriarchy (Ardhaoui 3, 6). According to Lachheb, the field is an institutional attempt to establish a strand and tradition of the subject that is Tunisia's own (Lachheb 11). Contrastingly, Ben Hassine argues that the subject should be extended to more universities in the long term (Ben Hassine 3). Grami emphasizes the will and need to participate in global feminist knowledge production. This is framed as a postcolonial necessity with criticism of neo-colonial collaborations with partner organizations (Grami 6).

Foci in the master's programs⁶

Interdisciplinarity as foundation
 All four interviewees point out and ascribe importance to the interdisciplinary structure of the master's program and of the teaching and courses. This specifically appears in a variety of teachers with different disciplinary backgrounds and foci on a certain time span (Ben Hassine 6; Grami 18; Lachheb 9; Ardhaoui 11). An interdisciplinary structure also appears in the following emphases of teachers and the master's programs.

Emphases of teachers and foci in the master's programs

The study program in Sousse emphasizes gender and history (of e.g. human rights, individual freedoms) and socio-economic questions (Ben Hassine 4; Lachheb 3), but also gender in administration (e.g. management, fiscality) and law (e.g. the CSP) (Ben Hassine 5). Besides this, there is a focus on gender and identity as they thematically appear in art, literature, language, and methods and methodology, as well as in guiding field research (Ben Hassine 4). "Feminine leadership" and trainings are important in Sousse and are also offered by partner organizations (Ben Hassine 6). Violence plays a role as a subject in both universities, especially in terms of extremism (Ben Hassine 6; Grami 29).

The Manouba study program also includes courses on methods and methodology (Grami 23). Besides, the Manouba program sets goals such as consciousness and awareness raising and addresses subjects such as gender in feminism, history, culture, literature, politics, religion, media, law, social movements, sexualities, identities, and labor (Grami 15; Ardhaoui 8).

Both master's programs work on the deconstruction of representations, stereotypes, and relations tied to social constructs such as femininity and masculinity (Ben Hassine 6; Grami 8, 19; Lachheb 2, 6; Ardhaoui 3). Partly mentioned are non-normative sexualities and identity formations (Ben Hassine 6; Grami 27; Lachheb 3; Ardhaoui 5).

The two master's programs further ascribe meanings to geographic and demographic cleavages (e.g. dichotomies like rural/urban, coastal/interior, etc.) and conduct research on extremism (Ben Hassine 10; Grami 29; Lachheb 16).

Further, there is a great emphasis on intersectionality, which includes class, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion in order to explain and research certain processes of intersectional societal ascriptions and invocations (Grami 5, 18; Lachheb 10).

Students' dissertations in the master's program differ slightly from the content-re-

lated tendencies shown above. They sometimes treat niche topics such as gender-transgressive perspectives on arts, work on transsexual⁷ persons in Tunisia, research on female jihadism, and the migration processes of Yemenite women in Syria (Ben Hassine 9).

Precariousness and hurdles

On a structural level, the two master's programs face different dimensions of precariousness. In the process of establishing the master's program, a crucial indicator was to have an approving dean (Ben Hassine 2). Intradepartmental conflicts were intense. These internal bureaucratic-administrative disputes had to be negotiated continuously (Ben Hassine 2; Grami 12).

Finances, resources, and budgets are too small in both programs (Ben Hassine 4; Grami 12). The budget for conferences and projects in particular remains fraught and precarious (Ben Hassine 11; Grami 14). Various interviewees pointed out that there is a dependence on international and political partners and collaborations, such as foundations or foreign universities. This also locates the study programs in the broader frame of a general dependence on projects and NGOs based in Tunisia that have international funding (Grami 14, 22). More generally, this is one

example of Tunisian institutions' financial dependence on global governance bodies such as the IMF (International Monetary Funds), with its typically restrictive requirements (Maghreb Post, Ben Abid, Chandoul).

Certain tendencies of the Ministry of Higher Education should be mentioned here as the broader structural context of these programs. As discussed in an article by Mohamed Samih Beji Okkez, who spoke with the Tunisian University Professors and Researchers Union (IJABA), public universities in Tunisia face financial shortages and marginalization in favor of the expansion of the privatization of the educational system, which was followed by sit-ins and protests by university professors and staff in 2018/2019. Besides, recruitment of teachers has been frozen since 2015, and the financial shortages in the field of scientific research overall led to approximately five thousand unemployed postgraduates in the country (Okkez). The precariousness of students in Tunisia is enormous, and job prospects were further limited by the Ministry of Higher Education. This led to students' protests in May 2019, as Grami explained to me (Grami 1).

Teachers in the master's programs often work additional jobs, for instance, one job as a teacher in the master's program,

another in an NGO or in lobbying (Grami 11). Grami points out that this leads to hurdles in staffs' capacities in evaluations, interventions, and improvements (11).

Students have difficulties finding someone to supervise their final projects in the master's program or in their initial discipline (Ardhaoui 9). In spring 2019, when the fieldwork was conducted, there was no officially appointed professor of Gender Studies in Tunisia. Until then, there was no dedicated PhD program in Gender Studies, either. Gender-minded students and graduates would have to study another subject in a well-established discipline and write their dissertations in that major (Grami 21).

Difficulties and prospects around visibilities

Certain themes, including LGBT-related content, have been the focus of political controversy. Teaching these topics involves putting finances at risk, with frank and open visibility appearing as a potential liability. Grami frames this as a concern and a matter of uncertainty (Grami 27). Especially in terms of the difficult, polarized political embedding of the study programs, visibility is an uncertain subject (Grami 27). This has become especially fraught in the wake of attacks on the subjects of the master's programs. Grami

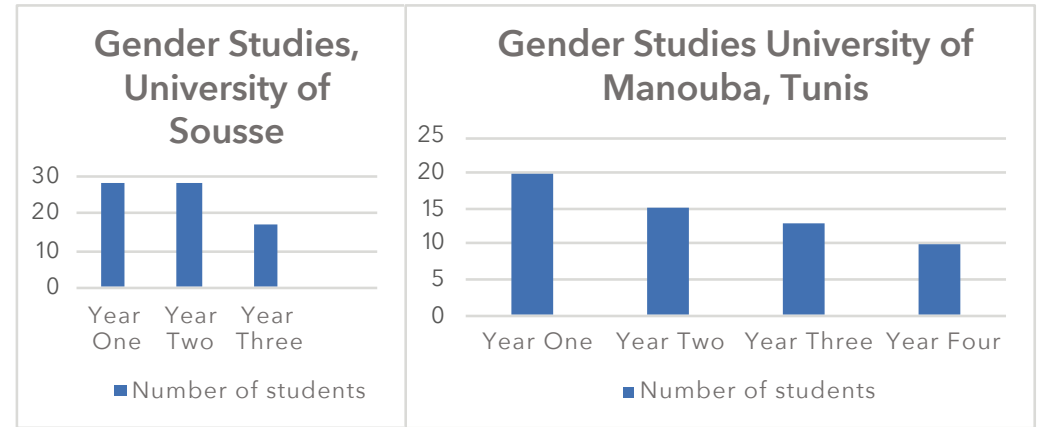


Fig. 1: Gender Studies, University of Sousse and Gender Studies, University of Manouba, Tunis. Source: Author.

points out that the continuity of the master's programs is contested and lies in the hands and the will of the program's teachers (Grami 29).

Nonetheless, there are at least two important tools of visibility tied to the programs. One is the Club of Gender Studies at the Manouba University in Tunis, which operates mostly via Facebook, but also organizes film screenings, discussions, conferences, and workshops (Grami 12). The other is the relatively new NGO *Tunisian Association of Gender Studies* (ATEG), founded by the Gender Studies master's program at the University of Sousse (Ben Hassine 3, 5). These processes show a way of institutionalizing Gender Studies and gender-related knowledge beyond the

programs' structure on a collegiate and an NGO level.

About students in the master's programs

The following chart shows the numbers of students in each program over the years until 2019 (Ben Hassine 7; Grami 20). The data shows a decrease in the number of enrolled students over time. This is framed as either being caused by a new regulation that requires English proficiency for admission in Sousse (Ben Hassine 7) or as a result of the issue around the aforementioned PhD prospects (Grami 21). Surprisingly, Grami adds that there were around 100 students interested in enrolling in the Manouba master's program in 2020, of whom the program selected 35.

So, the number of students in the Manouba masters program rose in the fifth year. The master's programs are generally carried out in Standard Arabic and French. At the University of Sousse, English recently became a third language and a part of the application. It is also planned to establish at least one English course (Ben Hassine 4). In contrast, the spokesperson of the master's program at Manouba says English remains a reading language and is not otherwise part of the courses (Grami 14). Students in the master's programs at Sousse are described as critical, open, diverse in age, competitive, and ambitious (Ben Hassine 3). Many students are affiliated with NGOs such as Amnesty International, the ATFD (Association Tunisienne de Femmes Démocrates), 'Aish Tunisi (a data collection and evaluation project), or the Rotary Club (Ben Hassine 3). Students are interested in democratic transition and women's rights, for example in the debate about the Law of Inheritance and civil status⁸ (Ben Hassine 3). Many students study part-time while working as judges, lawyers, or in public administration in Sousse (Ben Hassine 3). Grami points out that students at Manouba are critical and aware, both of the societal relevance of gender and the connection to everyday life and of the structure and issues appearing in the master's program.

These students clearly take a stance on different issues, including criticism of the study program itself (Grami 12, 15; Ardhaoui 6).

Students come from an enormous variety of initial majors. At Sousse, the students come from disciplines such as English, Arabic, History, Journalism, Political Sciences, and Law (Ben Hassine 7.). At the University of Manouba, students studied Arabic, French, Philosophy, Sociology, Nursing, Labor and Social Movement Studies, Archival Sciences, Economy, Architecture, and Media Studies (Grami 23).

Job prospects are described primarily as positions in ministries, schools, and NGOs (Grami 24; Ardhaoui 10). In regard to qualifications, Grami says that students gain an analytical gender lens. They could work in the aforementioned fields or in journalism, and they could improve the jobs and the quality of work in those professions (Grami 24). Ben Hassine notes that students gain theoretical and interdisciplinary views on gender and might learn how to do monitoring and workshops (Ben Hassine 8).

Partnerships and (neo)coloniality

The master's programs have various partner organizations and universities. The master's program in Sousse maintains several partnerships. One of the most import-

ant partnerships is with the Erasmus Plus Partners from Europe, Ukraine, and Morocco⁹ (Ben Hassine 2). The Manouba program used to be a partner in this project as well, but then withdrew from it. This was due to struggles with the (gender-) political agendas of the project's European partners, which were perceived as neocolonial (Grami 6). Grami clearly opposes the European attempt at (neo)colonial superiority in knowledge production on gender and in Queer Studies. She therefore withdrew from collaboration, taking a clear stance on what happened and what is required:

Because they had this idea from the first meeting on: we are from the North belonging to the West and we will teach you how you should teach gender. [...] I am not in this trend, you can listen to us, you can understand what is our work and you can also exchange ideas and experiences, etc. with us and I have a lot to share with you. And I am not in the position of the subaltern who should learn and consume. It is important to have an idea about what's happening in other countries, but I am familiar with this way of collaboration [...] (Grami 6)

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Conclusions

Gender Studies at Sousse and at Manouba are located in a contested and challenging political and economic environment and face severe struggles over finances (especially for projects), staff, and visibilities. In this context, European partner organizations also act in a (neo)colonial manner. Further, this article has shown that the contents and structures of the master's programs are depicted diversely, sometimes appearing as contesting or related, yet they heavily resonate with the overall societal situation. Students often enrich the picture by bringing in important considerations, ideas, and research.

From my current perspective, namely one year after conducting the fieldwork, now as a master's student in a Gender Studies program in 2020s Central Europe, and as a representative in the curricular process of that master's program, I would like to conclude this piece by stressing the following important connection with recourse to the background information, the notes on positionality, and the remark on Anti/Thesis from the beginning of the article:

The two master's programs in Tunisia definitely hinge in a particular way on their socioeconomic environments. Yet, certain structures of precariousness, relations of power, (institutional, neoliberal, (neo)colo-

nial) politics,¹⁰ and conflicts about what constitutes *proper* and *critical* knowledge production variously shape Central European Gender Studies programs,¹¹ too. University (life) consistently requires critical interventions, attention, discussion, activist contributions, new forms and practices of solidarity, and critique in consideration of and resistance to the aforementioned dynamics.

Notes

¹ My thanks to all the research participants for giving insights, information, and comments on the master's programs and Gender Studies. Special and great thanks to Amel Grami, Boutheina Ben Hassine, Monia Lachheb, and Naziha Ardhaoui. I want to thank Habib Kazdaghli and Hazem Chikhaoui for background information.

² Contact Prof. Dr. Amel Grami: grami2020amel@gmail.com. For further information on Grami see: www.recht-als-kultur.de/de/fellows/ehemalige-fellows/grami/

³ Contact Prof. Dr. Boutheina Ben Hassine: benhassineboutheina@yahoo.fr

⁴ For an overview of universities and academic freedom in Tunisia: Mohsen el Khouni, Mouldi Guessoumi, and Mohamed-Salah Omri, editors. *University and Society within the Context of Arab Revolutions and New Humanism*. Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Academic Cooperation, 2017.; Habib Mellakh, editor. *Liberté Académique et Charte Universitaire en Tunisie et Ailleurs*. Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung and the Association Tunisienne de Défense des Valeurs Universitaires, 2016.

⁵ The abbreviation *LGBT* (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans) is used here because the interviewees used it. To read about recent forms of and work on LGBT*IQ activism in Tunisia, I recommend: Shukrallah, Tarek. *Democratization and those who were 'left-behind'. An intersectional-materialist approach towards analyzing LGBT*IQ struggles within transformation processes in post-revolutionary Tunisia*. Rosa Luxemburg Foundation – North Africa Office, 2019.

⁶ Gender content and gender-related research and theory are dealt with not only in these two explicit programs. Especially in sociology, philosophy, and literary studies, there are many teachers dealing with Gender Studies, Feminist Sciences, or other gender-related research in Tunisia.

⁷ For further information on LGBT*IQ and rights in Tunisia see: Jelassi, Mohammed A. *Minoritized and discriminated against. Law as factor of inequality*. Heinrich Böll Stiftung Afrique du Nord, 2018.

⁸ See also: Commission des libertés individuelles et de l'égalité, abbreviation: COLIBE. For further information on the Tunisian constitutional process and feminism from 2011 to 2014, see Alma Laiadhi, Alicia Pastor y Camarasa, and Marc Verdussen. *Tunisia – Perspectives on the Tunisian Constitutional Process 2011-2014*. UCLouvain, 2018.

⁹ For the project GeSt and partners' attempts and goals, see: www.gestproject.eu/about-project/relevance-of-the-project/. Additional partner organizations with outreach and that offer workshops in the master's program at Sousse are The United Nations Women in Tunisia, the Canadian Forum of Federations, the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), the Bentley University in Boston, and the CREDIF (Centre de Recherches, d'Études de Documentation et d'Information sur la Femme in Tunis), according to Ben Hassine (8).

¹⁰ For insights into (institutional, neoliberal, (neo)colonial) politics and knowledge productions, see also (!): Ferguson, Roderick A. *The reorder of things, university and its pedagogies of minority difference*. University of Minnesota Press, 2012.; Mbembe, Achille Joseph. "Decolonizing the University: New Directions." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2016, pp. 29-45; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, Encarnación, Kien Nghi Ha, Jan Hutta, Emily Ngunbia Kessé, Mike Laufenberg, and Lars Schmitt. "Rassismus, Klassenverhältnisse und Geschlecht an deutschen Hochschulen, Ein runder Tisch, der aneckt." *Sub\urban. Zeitschrift für Kritische Stadtforschung*, vol. 4, no. 2/3, 2016, pp. 161-190.; Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies, Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, 2012.; Restrepo, Paula. "Legitimation of Knowledge, Epistemic Justice and the Intercultural University: Towards an Epistemology of 'Living Well.'" *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2014, pp. 140-154.

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→ ¹¹ For insights on the situation of Gender Studies and Feminist Science and associated conflicts in Vienna, see the following interview: Kroisleitner, Oona, and Traxler, Tanja. Interview with Birgit Sauer and Sushila Mesquita. "Forscherinnen: Ich habe das Gefühl ich bin in einem Dauerkampf." *Der Standard*. 8 Mar. 2015, www.derstandard.at/story/2000012455589/forscherinnen-ich-habe-das-gefuehl-ich-bin-in-einem-dauerkampf. Accessed 09 Apr. 2020. For insights on the German case, see also: Hark, Sabine, and Paula-Irene Villa, editors. *Anti-Genderismus, Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*. Transcript Verlag, 2015.

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