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Driven out: women's employment, the transport sector and social reproduction in Grand Tunis

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ABSTRACT

Employment in the transport sector has historically proven to be male-dominated, even in countries like Tunisia which have evidenced public policy narratives and legal employment frameworks promoting gender equality. This paper presented the findings from a grounded research study examining women's employment experiences in blue-collar roles in the transport sector of Greater Tunis. Drawing on extensive interviews with both female and male transport employees, as well as field observations, it demonstrates that familiar sectoral narratives of transport work as 'too rough, too hard and too dirty for women' can be understood through the broader political economy of the country and the transport sector within it. The research evidences the sustained and mutually-constitutive relationship between patriarchal cultural norms and capital's development through successive periods of populist welfarism and neo-liberal governance, indicating that progressive advances in women's employment rights are not socio-economically embedded and suggesting that future research would be usefully informed by feminist social reproduction theory.

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Introduction

In 2013, Tunisia's publicly-owned national airline, Tunisair, proudly marked international women's day with a much publicized flight crewed by an all-women team of pilots. The story was one of national success in breaking down the barriers to entry for women's labour force participation in even the most male-dominated of sectors, transport. As a country which lays claim to one of the region's most progressive employment rights regimes for women, and with a public narrative of female emancipation and equality, one might expect this success to be replicated across the transport sector but, as this paper will show, the reverse sadly remains the case, especially in the most blue-collar roles of public transport provision.

The research presented here comes from an ESRC-funded project[1] which investigated the everyday experiences of women using, and employed in, the transport sector in Grand Tunis. The objective of this project was to understand the impediments to both women's transport mobility and employment, and subsequently inform skills training programmes to be delivered by an international partner. While the user strand of the project focused on women living in the most socio-economically marginalized parts of the city, the employee strand focused instead on the women working in that part of the transport sector which most serviced the formers' mobility

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needs, public transport, across the metropolitan terrain. This paper reflects primarily the findings of the second, employee, strand of the project.

In the course of the research it became evident that, despite state endorsements of equitable female employment and a legal framework which one might expect would ease women's access to employment, the reality is (increasing) discrimination and exclusion. As is all-too-often the case elsewhere, transport employment remains heavily structured by informal barriers to entry and retention for women, as well as gender segregation, lower pay and negative work experiences. The narratives of transport employment as 'too rough, too dirty and too hard' for women underpin and legitimize their marginalization and exclusion. By positioning the results against accounts of the country's wider political economy, the research indicates that this is not so much specific to the transport sector but indicative of a larger problem around the intersection and mutually reinforcing impacts of an embedded patriarchal culture and the fortunes and vicissitudes of Tunisia's historical development strategies, particularly the neoliberal turn in recent decades. At the time of the data collection, the evidence suggested that both male and female workers were convinced that the transport sector is no place for a woman and that the inroads that women may have made in the past are increasingly under threat.

The research began by drawing on the exploration of the everyday as a methodology for interrogating the experiences and the meanings attributed to them by women, and men working with women, in blue-collar public transport roles. This grounded and inductive approach recognized the contributions of extent empirical research which had shown the transport sector to be universally and exceptionally resistant to female employment and progression. But our research soon led to three additional observations which offered some explanation as to how this universal characteristic manifested in the particular context of Tunis: that there was a striking discord between the public narratives (often repeated by respondents) of Tunisia's regionally exceptional progressiveness towards women's employment and the lived reality; that there was a perception of the closing down of the opportunities for women and indeed of the desirability of wage-labour which accompanied the deteriorating economic, political and security conditions of the country as they were reflected in the transport sector; and that there was a corresponding revitalization of patriarchal and discriminatory attitudes towards women which asserted the primacy of their domestic roles. The very clear connectedness between the structural context of Tunisia's economic evolution, the resultant specificities of the local transport system, and the salience of patriarchal cultural norms, leads us to propose here the usefulness of a broader political economy approach to both explain our findings and assert their greater relevance. The paper concludes that future research might usefully draw upon feminist social reproduction theory in elaborating upon these relationships.

The paper proceeds as follows: it first considers the transport sector as a site for female employment, noting the prevailing explanations for its exceptional resistance as well as their limitations. We then move to our own empirical material, presenting both the methodology used and the findings. Whilst these are in accord with the first discussion, they compel us to then further consider how women's employment in the transport sector reflects a larger story of the interplay between the role of women in the economic development of the country and gendered cultural norms through the prism of feminist social reproduction theory.

Transport sector employment – no place for a woman

The impact of gender on labour-force composition in the transport sector around the world has long been clear. In 2018, the ILO estimated that females represented less than 20% of the global transport workforce (ILO, 2019) and the European Transport Workers Federation has reported that only 22% of the European transport sector labour force are female, despite women comprising 45.9% of the workforce overall. Women are also unevenly distributed across the sector – comprising just 14% of the land transport labour force but 40% of the air transport workforce (European Transport Workers

Federation, 2021). The higher representation of women for some modes of transport reflects presumed gender differences. Coral and Isusi (2007) note that women are better represented in the passenger air transport sector than in land or maritime sectors because cabin crew are identified as care-givers, doing 'emotional work' (Hochschild, 1983) as opposed to males who comprise 98% of the global total of commercial pilots. The International Maritime Organisation reported in 2020 that only 2% of all the world's 1.2 million maritime employees were female, while ILO estimates suggest that nearly 30% of cruise ship workers are female, again suggesting that when they *are* employed in transport occupations, women are more often found in nurturing, customer-facing roles associated with supposedly female characteristics (Ng & Acker, 2020, p. 5).

Efforts to explain the sector's low level of female employment abound in the grey literatures of international transport and development organizations (Coral & Isusi, 2007; Ng & Acker, 2020, ETWF, 2021; Helfferich, 2020; Field & Haddad, 2021) and are usually understood as comprising formal and informal barriers to women's recruitment, retention and promotion. Formal barriers include legal restrictions, discriminatory recruitment practices, gendered pay differentials, and disparities in education which discourage women from pursuing STEM subjects or accessing relevant training opportunities. Informal barriers include the channelling of women away from higher paid skilled technical roles into lower-paid clerical and customer service roles (Porter, & Omwega, 2022), at times their exclusion from or marginalization within trade unions and thus inadequate representation, employers' perceptions that women are less reliable than men due to their family commitments and the likelihood of maternity or care-related career interruptions, and women themselves being deterred from transport employment by poor working conditions. Domestic care obligations are considered by both employers and employees as incompatible with night-work, shift work, and unpredictable hours. Women are deterred by workplace ergonomics which create a ''male' environment which can include everything from an absence of appropriate bathroom facilities and equipment which relies on brute strength, to macho cultural symbolism such as the display of pornographic material on workplace walls. One of the most significant deterrents is the very high prevalence of gender-based violence to which women are subjected by both colleagues and customers, behaviours which are normalized and even condoned by masculine workplace cultures and gender stereotyping. These barriers are packaged in three related narratives (Eveline, 1998): that transport work is too 'heavy' (implying the physical demands or even danger that it represents) for women; that it entails a 'dirty culture' of roughness and aggression for which women are psychologically unsuited; and that 'limp women' are unmotivated or emotionally unsuited to it. These narratives are instrumentalised to justify both the confinement of women to specific, usually low-paid, non-technical roles and the failure to provide suitable working conditions and environments. Precisely because they emphasize biological difference and lower physical strength, the narratives have particular salience in the blue-collar components of the sector, but since this is often the entry-point for progression to white collar managerial roles, they produce a narrowing pipeline such that women are under-represented at all levels.

Researching women and employment in the Tunis transport system through the everyday

When we started our own research, it was immediately evident that women's representation in the transport labour force in Tunis conforms to this generalized condition (although it was also clear that there is a dearth of systematically-collected data on this within Tunisia itself). The ILO reports (ILO, 2019) that in 2017 women filled just 18,600 jobs in the transport and storage sector, out of a total of 187,100 (9.94%) while a Labour Market Profile published in 2021 (DTUDA) indicated that by 2020 this had fallen to just 7.5% of transport employees being female.

The high-profile professional roles mentioned at the start of this paper contrast with the real scarcity of women: in 2019 for example, just one out of 24 municipalities had a female regional transport director. In blue-collar roles, the picture appeared stark although hard data was impossible

to find, even from the major transport providers. For example, Transtu, the public sector provider of 80% of buses, trams and trains in the city, does not publish the gender breakdown of its workforce. We were largely reliant on observation and anecdote: in 2014 it was reported in a newspaper that there were just 40 female taxi drivers in the capital, out of a total of 16,000 drivers (Alvi, 2014) a figure which it was asserted had reduced to just 30 out of 18,000 when we conducted our research in 2019 (Male UTTI official). Women are more visible in administrative and public-facing roles such as ticket-selling on buses and trams, but again precise numbers were not available.

However, our research was not intended to address this issue of the scale of women's employment *per se* but rather the experience of that employment (not least to support the larger research project which aimed to inform a skills and training initiative looking for ways to support women in transport use and employment). We focused our attention on the everyday experiences of female transport employees and their strategies in navigating or resisting those experiences. Study of the everyday exposes the relationships of power which exist not just between reified institutions like the state, organizations like transport employers, or even generalized conceptions of the public or society, but also those that are evident in the mundane relationships of the household and the neighbourhood. The routine quotidian practices of individuals are an expression (albeit deeply unequal) of agency-based power, and as outcomes of social, cultural and historical situatedness (Leander & Prügl, 2019, p. 1). The focus on individuals' experiences and behaviour in engaging with the material world, would bring into gaze both the structures which subordinate them *and* their capacities to resist through actions integrated into their social lives (Scott, 1989; Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013, p. 3). Study of the everyday is already making its way into the study of transport in developing countries (Peters, 2002, p. 20, Xiao, 2018), urban life in Africa (Adebanwi, 2017) and women's mobility (Møller-Jensen, 2021), although we did not find it explicitly used in research in women's employment. Because resistance is heterogenic, contingent, and enmeshed with the multiple hierarchies of social, economic and political power, it is necessarily intersectionally derived, suggesting that female transport workers will both experience their employment differently from male colleagues and exhibit different patterns of behaviour than their male counterparts, as well as between themselves. We anticipated that through discussion of their everyday employment lives, we could learn more about what brought women into work in the transport sector, and what pushed them out; what formal and informal barriers they faced, as well as how they might be empowered or enabled to surmount, evade or resist these obstacles. Study of the everyday leads to an inductive research approach: we did not prejudge what women might wish to talk about by superimposing a meta-theoretical framework to interviews or data derived from them. The data presented below is structured around the themes they raised and not those we might otherwise have sought to illuminate.

Research methods

The data for this project comprised primarily semi-structured interviews with, and ethnographic observations of, both women and men working in the public transport sector of Grand Tunis. The focus was on workers in lower-paid, blue-collar occupations which located them at the coalface of the transport system's delivery. In Tunis, this includes buses, the Metro (tram or light rail) and taxis (both private and collective minibuses or CMTs). Due to heavy government regulation, Tunis does not have a range of unregulated and informal modes of transport comparable with the 'rickshaws, tuk-tuks, jeepneys, minibuses and motorbikes [which] abound across Asia, Africa and South America' (Evans et al., 1998, p. 1). The yellow SNT[2] buses and the SMLT[3] Metro system are both owned and run by the parastatal company Transtu,[4] with four private bus companies being additionally allowed to operate just 10% of the bus network or 30 routes, the majority of which run through wealthier suburbs of the city (CMI, 2017). An overall insufficiency of buses and the limited route map of the Metro leaves Tunis residents heavily dependent on the different taxi services available. Private 'yellow' taxis are metered, while cheaper CMTs (which have between 6–9 seats including the driver,

Table 1. Respondents by occupation and gender.

	Female	Male
Bus driver	1	4
Taxi driver	4 (inc. 1 also union rep.)	6
Metro (tram) driver	4 (inc. 1 also union rep.)	1
Ticket seller	6	2
Station worker		2
Administrative worker	2	
Manager	2	2
Intigo rider		1
Union leader		1
TOTAL	19	19

but which frequently travel with 13–16 passengers) are unscheduled and service the peripheries of the city and routes into the Centre. In recent years yellow taxi drivers have been able to register with ride-hailing apps to provide a more expensive service and a new motorcycle taxi start-up, Intigo surfaced in 2019.

Our research team in Tunis (comprising three female and, in the early stage, one male researcher, (two of whom were Tunisian), speaking predominantly Tunisian Arabic and all with extensive qualitative fieldwork experience, including having worked on the transport user strand of the larger project) approached both the transport companies, transport unions and individual transport employees whom they met in the course of their travels round the city. Official meetings rarely yielded more than a bureaucratic resistance to data sharing, interviews, and referrals, but approaches to individual transport workers proved productive. Most were willing to talk, and indeed would convene further meetings with colleagues on our behalf. In total 38 transport workers were interviewed, including 19 female and 19 male respondents. (We had planned more but unfortunately the COVID-19 pandemic brought a premature end to this stage of data gathering). Table 1 indicates the distribution of respondents by gender and job description. One female researcher also travelled with a number of the female tram, bus and taxi drivers on their daily routes, or sat with them in their ticket kiosks, observing their interactions with passengers, other transport workers and police or transport officials. These observations were used to confirm interview data. The ethical approval granted by Durham University (Anthropology Department) required that all written or verbal consent should be gained from interviewees after being provided with appropriate information about the research, how it would be used and how data would be stored. All respondents were also offered anonymity – as the data shows transport is by no means a secure or neutral working environment – and in the discussion below we have offered only the gender, occupation and age approximation of interviewees. It should be noted that all the female taxi drivers interviewed owned or drove private yellow taxis – we were unable to find any female collective taxi drivers.

Although the primary focus was on bus, Metro and taxi drivers, ticket sellers, and station security personnel, we also included a small sub-set of senior managers, union officials and administrative staff. Interviews were recorded where possible or were written up as notes by the researcher both in transit and post-facto.

A final note on use of interview data is that we have chosen to include many direct quotations. This reflects a conscious effort to give appropriate significance and respect to the spoken work of the subject and not to continually speak over, or for, the interviewees.

Barriers to entry for women in the transport sector

As mentioned, we were unable to find reliable statistics on exactly how many women drivers, ticket-sellers or other employees there were in any of these services – whilst companies are clearly reluctant to release data it was not clear that any of them even actually collected it. (Transtu's own human resources website does not provide any gender breakdown for either employment or transport

usage). However it was immediately apparent that blue-collar transport roles in Tunis are, as the broader literature discussed above would suggest, highly gendered. While we struggled to find female taxi, bus and Metro (tram) drivers to interview, ticket sellers were largely female. We were frequently informed that women predominated in administrative roles but also that they found it difficult to progress upwards to management status.

Exploring the reason for gendered roles *within* blue-collar transport employment is an important task in itself and usually constituted the entry point to interviews. According to our interviews, the explanation was not to be found in any government legislation or formal exclusions. Indeed, respondents indicated that there were no formal barriers to entry for women into driving roles – they have after all been driving taxis since 1974 (Alvi, 2014). We were often told, especially by male respondents and often with some pride at the country's progressive legal record, that Tunisian law provides employment equality for women, that 'by laws, women and men are equal and they should be able to have the same jobs' (male, taxi driver, 50s), and that they all faced the same technical entry requirements, the minimum being the 'technique' diploma from secondary school and two years of University study.

In reality, however, there are informal barriers to entry when it comes to gaining the necessary qualifications. For example, to be awarded a licence to drive taxi, a driver must complete a two year apprenticeship with an actual driver.

> *Women apply for these jobs but [male] taxi drivers won't take them as apprentices. It is too dangerous, they don't want the responsibility . . .. Even with bus companies, you sometimes have ten women for every 200 men. (Female, Regional Director Transport)*

By contrast, entry into ticketing and administrative roles is relatively easy, if not especially desirable. While bus drivers must serve a six month internship before qualifying, '*to be a ticket seller, you have a one-month internship to see how good you are in selling the tickets and dealing with passengers and problems that might occur in the bus' (female ticket seller, private bus company, 30s)*. Even when women did make it into a driving role, this was initially often more out of necessity than choice, although – as will be discussed later – some subsequently found it very rewarding. One female taxi driver told us that she '*chose to work as a driver because I did not have enough education to do something else' (Female taxi driver, 50s)* while a male driver said of his female colleagues: *'It's a tough business and it is dangerous for women. I do not know how they do it. But I think if they are doing it, then it's not a choice' (Male taxi driver, 40s)*.

Our interviews indicated that the primary reasons for the virtual absence of women in driving roles, and the generally low numbers of women in the sector as a whole, lay firmly within the three narratives of blue collar transport work identified in the broader literature, and that transport work is considered too hard, too dirty and too emotionally stressful for women.

For a start, transport work, and driving in particular, was universally considered to be physically demanding, with strength being required to deal with poor transport infrastructure, dangerous road conditions, vehicle maintenance, difficult customers and financial pressures. We were repeatedly told by males and females alike that '*not many women work as taxi drivers because taxi driving is a tough job. Weak women cannot work as taxi drivers. Only strong women can work as drivers' (female taxi driver, 50s)*, that *'men are stronger so they can take better care of themselves' (male taxi driver, 30s)* and that *'Driving a bus is a very difficult task even for men. It must be more difficult for women to do this job' (male bus driver, 30s)*.

Driving buses and trams and selling tickets were also universally considered to be dangerous jobs. A variety of sources of danger were identified including the poor conditions of vehicles, the antisocial behaviour of customers, and the particular lack of safety in so-called *popular* neighbourhoods resulting from crime, drug and alcohol abuse. Male interviewees referenced these dangers as often as females, claiming that there were some places that even they would not go to, but there was a consensus that women were not only especially vulnerable but also that they particularly should not be exposed to these dangers.

> *The road condition is catastrophic, and this bus is not secure. There's no security. . . . .This happens to women who work as ticket sellers and who work as drivers, in buses and taxis . . . . There are not many women drivers because in Tunis the roads are dangerous and there are many car accidents. Not like men, women are afraid of them. (female ticket seller, private bus company, 30s)*

The point was repeatedly made in interviews that transport work had become substantially more unsafe after the 2011 Uprising, with the scarcity of police and worsening anti-social behaviour and harassment. A female bus ticket seller told us that: '*Before the revolution, we used to work even until 10pm. But after the revolution, harassment increased and consumption of drugs increased. The government doesn't exist when its needed. So the company stopped operating buses in the late evening' (female bus ticket seller, 40s)* while a female taxi driver asserted that she had stopped working in the evenings altogether because: '*When Ben Ali was ruling, Tunisia was really safe and women were able to work even at night. But now the streets are not safe' (female taxi driver, 50s)*. During our research, the state-owned Transtu announced that women would no longer be allowed to drive trams into one of the popular areas considered least safe and that female bus drivers would no longer be working evening shifts for the same reason.

Transport work was also considered to be 'dirty' work and culturally unsuitable for women. One female taxi driver told us how her male colleagues would use deserted areas for a bathroom, an option not available to women. Others recounted extensively how they faced aggressive attitudes and sexual harassment from male colleagues and interlocutors including police officers, taxi permit owners and customers. In fact sexual harassment at work is prohibited by the Organic Law No. 2017–58 of 11 August and companies should take proactive steps to prevent it but the official discourses are not reflected in the resigned attitudes of male interviewees who also frequently referred to the sexual harassment of female colleagues as well as women and girls in general, telling us how *'there are many perverts in this country' (male taxi driver, 50s)* and *"thank God my daughters' school is near our house" (male taxi driver, 40s)*. It is worth noting here that a study conducted by a Tunisian research centre in 2016 (CREDIF, 2016) found that 64.5% of 4000 women respondents (26% of whom lived in Grand Tunis) had suffered some kind of GBV in public spaces, and that this was heavily concentrated in public transport.

However, there was tension in the cultural expectations of women here: whilst they rejected sexual harassment from colleagues and customers, some interviewees also expected that women should be treated differently from men according to their gender. Women's reputed emotional unsuitedness for transport roles, their 'limpness' as it were, was frequently commented upon. One male driver described women as *'slow and weak'*, another as *'sensitive'* and prone to crying, while a female administrators told us:

> *'Maybe men know how to react when they have trouble with passengers. They respond to bad passengers, not like women. Women are afraid of them and don't want to face troubles . . . '. (female administrator, 40s)*

An interesting aspect of this asserted 'limpness' of women was the repeated suggestion that customers would frequently argue with female drivers and ticket sellers over fares or demands for change in ways they would not do with male transport staff, and that women would be weak in their responses. Since private bus companies require staff to make up any discrepancies between tickets sold and income received, this can impose significant financial burdens on women staff.

An alternative perspective was offered by one female Metro driver, who suggested that women's *'careful and sensitive'* natures were recognized as making them better and safer drivers, nonetheless repeating the naturized perception of women's employment.

> *Women are well known in their jobs that they are prudent and careful. Because it's our job and we have to take care of our job and we don't want to lose it . . .. . . In all statistics women are more disciplined in their work. This is our nature and a gift from God. Statistics show that women are more serious in their jobs. Men are irresponsible whereas women are very serious in their jobs. (female Metro driver, 40s)*

Conservative culture and women's domestic role

It was not only considered unsafe for women to work the evening and night shifts required by transport sector work. There was also a negative connotation applied to women themselves in our interviews, a suggestion that 'nice' women would not want to be out late. As one female Metro driver wryly observed: *'Metro driving is a men's field. Drivers have to be out on the streets at 3 am for work. Which women are out on the streets at 3am?' (female Metro driver, 30s)*.

Moreover, women were perceived to have domestic and family responsibilities which should take precedence over such work. Indeed, this was one of the topics most discussed by interviewees. Both men and women would assert that women's first job was to look after their families and women would often explain how they limited their working hours so as to be available for childcare and to cook evening meals. Observing that '*Men wake up, sip coffee and go to work, whereas women wake up, prepare meals, take kids to school and then go to work'*, one female bus company secretary (40s) also noted that '*Of course it's a woman's job'*.

It was not surprising that women often commented on the exhaustion that accompanies this dual role as they juggled early starts in the morning with late nights completing domestic chores (and indeed to be 'always working, always exhausted' has been noted as a feature of female embodiment under neo-liberal capitalism, a point we will return to later, Taha & Salem, 2009, p. 51).

Not surprisingly, some women workers expressed appreciation of the efforts made by companies, both public and private, to accommodate their childcare and domestic responsibilities, specifically being relieved of shifts on Sundays, and being allocated morning rather than evening shifts. This was viewed as a supportive action and there was no commentary on how this might reinforce the more negative dimensions of gender distinction in the workplace.

As women, we get support. Men have no choice in terms of work schedule and their holidays are determined by the company. Us women can have our weekly holiday on Sunday in order to take care of the house and the children. The company helped us. There are benefits for women (female Metro driver, 40s).

Overall there were mixed views around the suitability of women acting as drivers and transport staff in general. Sometimes it was suggested that this depended on the area where they were working; that women workers were more socially acceptable in 'modern' areas like the city centre and the coastal region, but less so in the more conservative interior and 'popular' neighbourhoods or *gourbivilles*. For others it was a generalized cultural determinant:

> *People (men) still think our sector is a men's field. It's because all public transport is full of male employees. Only three or four (women) out of a thousand (men) because of lots of problems and harassments. They consider this job is not appropriate for women. We respect people but they don't respect us. They are, like, 'how dare women get on the bus and work'. (female bus ticket seller, 40s)*

The contradictions between an historic public discourse and legal equality when it comes to employment on the one hand, and the social embeddedness of the notion of female weakness and their domestic responsibilities on the other, was evident in interviews. Male interviewees would frequently preface assertions of the primacy of women's domestic roles with references to their nonetheless equal status:

> *If her situation allows her to do so, what's the problem. The important thing is that she knows how to drive. . . . Even we encourage them to work. We have women drivers . . .. . . .The reason we don't have many women drivers is because women have a different role, that's all. Men and women are different. Women are sensitive and weak mentally and physically. (male UTTI official)*

For women interviewees, the discrepancies were more clear. As one bus ticket seller told us: '*In Tunisia, women suffer a lot because they have too many responsibilities at home. If men do dishes and cook, they are not men. It's the mentality. If women don't cook and prepare the clothes for men, they would say "why did I marry you then"? Women enjoy a lot of freedom in laws only. You don't find women's freedom in families'. (female bus ticket seller, 40s)*.

One way in which this contradiction is expressed is through the imperatives for women transport workers to dress conservatively, to downplay their femininity, and yet still be judged harshly for it. Female transport workers told us how they wore trousers or long skirts, avoiding nail polish and makeup, in order to avoid sexual harassment. Others noted the negative normative assumptions made about women working in the sector telling us: *'I am perceived as a vulgar tramp and I am treated as such . . . .I wear baggy and less feminine clothes as a strategy in order not to get harassed . . . my siblings think it's a tramp job and they always mock me' (female taxi driver, 40s)*.In return, male interviewees would mock the women for looking rough and '*dressing like a man*'.

Where, one might ask, is the solidarity among workers? In fact the sector's workforce is heavily unionized, taxis through the National Union of Individual Taxi Drivers and the National Chamber of Taxi Drivers and bus and metro workers through the Union General Union of Tunisian Workers. One might expect the trades unions to act as champions of women working in the sector. But as elsewhere this has hardly been the case. Our female interviewees found that formal endorsements of gender equality rarely translated into meaningful representation. The majority of female respondents indicated that they felt excluded from union activities and that their interests were unrecognized.

> *I have been working as a representative of our union for around one year, and nothing has been done to improve the working conditions of women drivers. Even women in the union are always rejected because this sector is a men's field. Even women's ideas. Demands from women are often rejected because this sector (metro driving) belongs to men. Men say 'no, no, no' Why no? Because I am a woman. (female metro driver, 30s)*

Again women's perceived domestic responsibilities loomed large, in both male and female responses. Female transport workers told us they did not have time to go to union meetings which often took place after work when women had to rush home to take care of domestic tasks, or in cafes and bars which are culturally inhospitable to women. This was considered normal by male colleagues, one official from the Taxi Drivers union, which includes 12,000 of the 18,000 registered taxi drivers in Grand Tunis, explaining the absence of elected women representatives as follows:

> *It' a voluntary activity and if women accept to participate in our union work, because she has other responsibilities in her house, she cannot balance between house, work and union activities. That's why it is very difficult for her to be a representative of the Union. Union activities entail responsibilities. I have this responsibility in addition to work. And women work and have responsibility for her children. She cannot add another responsibility (male Tunisian Union of Individual Taxis (UTTI) official).*

Women are excluded from the representation which might allow their interests and working conditions to be fully acknowledged as male colleagues feel entitled to represent women, reproducing a failure to address fundamental informal discriminations which counters the legal rights of women.

(Un)equal pay for equal work

Although employment laws in Tunisia entitle women to equal pay for equal work, there is inevitably a negative impact on their income as a result of this gender differentiation, which is also reflected in the gender pay gap in the wider economy. According to the Tunisian National Institute of Statistics, women are paid, on average, between 20 and 30% less than men, a figure reaching 40% in the private sector and a staggering 50% in agriculture (Cargnelutti, 2018). It is also the case that women's employment is heavily concentrated in those sectors which are considered more amenable to female characteristics but which are most poorly paid (education, health, administrative services and part-time or precarious light industrial roles) and that returns (wages) increase directly according to experience and seniority which is problematic for women simultaneously carrying the domestic burden (Jeddi & Malouche, 2015) or excluded by virtue of a narrowing pipeline. We were told by our interviewees that women in all roles were paid the

same rates as male colleagues, but also that the structure of working and the gendering of some roles, resulted in significantly lower incomes. Taxi fares are regulated but if women cannot drive at night or in areas deemed most dangerous, then their opportunities for incomes are reduced. If driving roles are staffed mostly by males, while females occupy ticketing roles, then the pay differences between roles adversely impacts women.

> *There's workers who work as drivers and at the same time sell tickets. They earn more than women ticket sellers. Also drivers earn more than ticket sellers. The difference between workers who drive and sell tickets and workers who drive only is not big. They might earn 200 dinars more. No big difference. That's why companies prefer to hire workers who can drive and sell tickets at the same time in order to save money. All ticket sellers in our company are women. We don't have male ticket sellers. All male workers who sell tickets have bus driving licenses and. (female bus ticket seller, 40s)*

This might also account for reports that male bus drivers are earning 16% more than their female counterparts in 2023 and male drivers in other roles earn 9% more (Salary Explorer, 2023). If women are more reluctant to confront non-paying customers, they are more likely to have penalties deducted from their wages by the companies they work for, and if the burdens of their domestic work are perceived to impede their capacities to 'do more', they are unable to materialize the gains of greater responsibility and promotion.

In sum, the data collected confirmed that women's employment in the transport sector is constrained not by formal barriers to entry but rather by informal barriers sustained by a profoundly gendered narrative that the work is too rough, hard and dirty for women. There are no obvious pull factors that might make transport employment attractive for them (such as high wages or social status) and women face a constant underlying presumption that not only are they unsuited for the work but also that somehow it is culturally inappropriate for them to do so, unless they occupy low paid administrative and customer-facing roles or – exceptionally – they make it up into managerial ranks. The privileging of women's presumed domestic role constitutes a patriarchal cultural rationale for their subordination, devaluation and ultimately exclusion.

Accounting for the findings: the structural context of female employment and Tunis public transport

Beyond confirming that gendered narratives inform the informal exclusion of women from the transport sector, the data offered three intriguing, important and related insights all of which we suggest may find an explanation in the larger development story of Tunisia and in its national political economy.

Firstly, there was a clear tension between Tunisia's regional progressiveness when it comes to legal codes affirming women's equality in the field of paid employment on the one hand, and the sustained patriarchal belief in the primacy of the domestic responsibilities of women on the other, a characteristic of the Tunisian labour market that has been extensively commented on by others (Abu-Zahra, 1997; Charrad, 2001; Gana, 2010; Tchaicha & Arfsoui, 2012). Oueslati-Porter (2013) has argued powerfully that this sustained belief in the primacy of women's role in social reproduction has never seriously been challenged throughout the supposed modernization of the country. Following independence in 1956, the country's secularist president, Habib Bourguiba, instigated a set of reforms, notable amongst which was the Personal Status Code, which offered women equal employment rights and promises of equal pay among other emancipatory steps. His modernizing agenda resulted in a state-feminist discourse which supported the education and public participation of all women but without challenging prevailing patriarchal norms. Bourguiba himself said 'Women should make no mistake as to the proper meaning of their emancipation . . . they must not demonstrate excessive independence . . . Women have access to schooling because they will thus be better equipped to carry out the two-fold tasks expected of them. They will be better housewives and better able to educate their children' and that 'their role in public life must, in their minds, be

secondary compared to their family responsibilities as mothers and housewives' (speech to the Congrès de l'Union Nationale des Femmes en Tunisie, 13 August , quoted in Ferchiou, 1998, p. 192). It might not be surprising then by 1966 the national census was showing that just 66,469 women were formally employed out of a total labour force of 1,093,735 (just 6%). The highest concentrations of female employment were as artisans (28,177), agricultural workers (28,177), and in roles associated with female attributes; teaching (3,653), office work (5,323) and nursing/midwifery (2,494). Just 575 women were identified as being employed in transport and communications, out of a total sector labour force of 28,627 (Hawker-Durrans, 1976, p. 62). These statistics did not take into account the very large numbers of women employed informally, most notably in the agricultural sector and often on family farms or in small family artisan production which never reached the notice of bureaucrats and tax officials, but those very omissions were indicative of the low value associated with women's employment.

By the 1970s and 1980s, decades of Bourguibist state feminism, geared towards the mobilization of women into the nation-building project (Murphy, 2003; Kallander, 2021) combined with welfarism and the expansion of public sector, had increased female employment to 12% of the workforce, placing Tunisia at the forefront of the region. However, women's employment remained overwhelmingly concentrated in professional – mostly public sector- roles, vocational fields associated with female nurturing characteristics such as education and health, and agriculture where women filled the (low paid) gaps left by male labour migration to the oil-rich Gulf states. The growing and then relatively high wage industrial sector, much like transport, remained a mostly male enclave: although rates in Tunisia were higher than elsewhere in the MENA region much of this was accounted for by home-based or irregular work for women (Moghadam, 2018, p. 117). The narrative of the male family breadwinner with women providing auxiliary income through socially acceptable forms of work, remained firmly in place.

In the late 1980s, overwhelmed by debt and poor economic performance, Tunisia was forced to change development strategy, embarking on a succession of structural adjustment programmes, retrenching the public sector, withdrawing welfarist social supports, and promoting private-sector export-oriented industrialization. Bourguiba's successor, Zine El Abidine Bel Ali, consolidated the neo-liberal turn. Prolonged austerity measures cut into subsidies and welfare provisions, as well as public sector employment opportunities for women, who were sucked instead into the often low wage precarious work offered by private sector textile and light manufacture factories servicing exports to Europe. Manufacturing was to some extent feminized through the 1990s and 2000s. Moghadam (2018, p. 22) reports that by the early 1990s 43% of manufacturing employees were female, most of whom were clustered in the low added-value garments sector servicing EU markets or working in export-processing zones. While this led to a regionally exceptional growth in female employment (Moghadam, 2019, p. 344), it was not a result of a cultural shift in favour of equalized opportunities, but rather a result of declining alternative employment opportunities, increased pressure on household incomes, and foreign capital's requirements for flexible, temporary, low-cost labour. A change in the law in 1992 allowed private factory employers to place workers on long-term temporary contracts which have no form of social security provision attached, and the principal union (the UGTT) showed little interest in promoting the rights of temporary workers, preferring instead to protect the rights of its existing, mostly male and 'breadwinner' constituents from erosion of their own rights and wages (Brenner, 2019).

The neo-liberal turn in Tunis bought scant reward: economic growth averaged just 2.4% through the period 1981–2000 (after demographic growth had been accounted for) and has since stagnated. The Arab uprising in 2011 led to a significant withdrawal of foreign investment, impacting export-oriented textiles and manufacturing and, although the female labour participation rate had reached 23% by 2018, the highest among the Arab countries (OECD, 2018), female unemployment rates have also risen – from 16.1% in 2000 to 24.7% in 2020, compared to a male unemployment rate of 12.3% (World Bank, 2023) so whilst Tunisia may have one of the highest female labour participation rates in the MENA region at 23% in 2018 (OECD, 2018), 'weak economic growth has not generated

a sufficient pull to draw [more] women into the labour force and overcome societal gender roles' (World Bank, 2022).

Despite the progressive attributes of the Personal Status Code and associated employment legislation, the state's reluctance to enforce equitable employment law in both letter and spirit (one of the weaknesses of institutional frameworks referenced in Moghadam's, 2019 study of women's employment in Tunisia) has meant that female paid labour is not driven by their empowerment but rather subordinated to the changing requirements of capital mediated by the privileging of an institutionalized male breadwinner ethos which has been used to justify lower wages for women, precarious working conditions, and continued female dependence on males. In the post-uprising era, the Bourguiba/Ben Ali model of patriarchal state feminism has been challenged by a range of diverse and often contradictory alternatives (Khalil, 2014, p. 1), with political battles between secular and Islamist women's organizations over the constitutional status, rights and roles of Tunisian women crowding out collective mobilization around issues of women's equal labour force participation and disproportionate unemployment (Moghadam, 2018, p. 3).

A second key observation from our data was that patriarchal culture pervades the organization and operation of the sector, from male-dominated management to exclusionary trades union practices, to regulatory environments which constrain women's advances (such as the conditions attached to licences for driving CMTs). These are the levers through which that regulation of female entry into, or exclusion from, the transport labour market is managed, with the narratives of work as 'too rough, too hard and too dirty" providing discursive cover. It is worth noting here the Arab Barometer survey, wherein Tunisia emerges as the Arab country which exhibits the lowest cultural resistance to female employment. In 2022 the survey data suggested that structural impediments to women's employment in general were more significant than cultural issues. In the survey 68 of women of women and 60% of men thought that structural barriers such as the absence or unaffordability of child care, poor transport availability and low wages were the main impediments to women working in the formal economy, while 32% of male respondents and 25% of females saw cultural issues comprising the greater obstacles. However, this is a misleading dichotomy since structural issues like childcare arrangements reflect cultural predispositions. An Arab Barometer Survey in 2022 (Arab Barometer, 2022) confirmed that over half of Tunisians (51%) believe that taking care of the home and children is a women's primary responsibility (with the proportion of women agreeing being only slightly below that of men) so inevitably the lack of childcare poses a far greater barrier for women than men when moving into the workforce.

The final observation to be made here is that the data suggested things are getting worse for women in transport employment. Our respondents commented frequently on the rising crime, anti-social behaviour, and gender-based violence that have come to characterize Tunis' public space since the 2011 uprising and which compounds the insecurities caused by the decaying public transport system. Neoliberal austerity has meant very low levels of public investment in either transport infrastructure or Transtu itself. Roads are congested and in poor condition while the remaining serviceable vehicles are dilapidated and evidence hasty repairs. Unemployed youths resort to mugging travellers and hijacking public transport vehicles to garner an income. Police resources are overstretched and corrupt, compromised by their collusion in an authoritarian past and offering few protections to workers and travellers alike. Women endure a normalization of sexul harassment and GBV in public spaces (CREDIF, 2016). In short, Tunisia is enduring a prolonged economic, political and increasingly social crisis which is genuinely impacting the security and safety of transport workers. In this environment, the narrative of transport employment as too dangerous for women gains additional traction and acts as a very real push factor moving women out of the sector.

It has been argued that that since the 2011 uprising there has been something of a social backlash against the growing autonomy of women that accompanied their inroads into paid employment under first Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Both presidents constructed women's role around an aspiration for modernity via patriarchal nationalism (Oueslati-Porter, 2013, p. 156) and ultimately neoliberal

capitalism. This empowered women in so far as it opened doors to their employment in work predominantly associated with female characteristics and/or which traded on the male breadwinner role to pay them low wages and sustain precarious working conditions. But the door was never fully opened in sectors more conventionally associated with male characteristics, like transport, and it is now being pushed closed again as Tunisian women have proved to be disposable workers in a time of crisis! (Magdoff & Magdoff, 2004).

It was noticeable that not one of the female drivers we met was in her twenties and most were in their forties or fifties suggesting that this part of the female transport workforce may already be in decline. The women we interviewed were often conscious that they were fighting a battle just to remain in employment, whether from a hostile work environment, from resentful or prejudiced male colleagues or just from simple exhaustion at having to manage both their work and domestic roles. Pressure on household incomes may still compel women to seek work but their opportunities to do so remain hostage to the intersections of embedded patriarchal culture and the specific configurations of the crisis-ridden neoliberal labour market in Tunisia.

Conclusion

Reviewing our data on women's employment experiences in the transport sector in Tunis has led us here to assert the value of locating it within a broader understanding of the historic political economy of the country. It has suggested that understanding the relationship between specific trajectories of development, including recent incarnations of neoliberal capitalism, and women's empowerment (or not) is central to this story. The particular intersection of patriarchal culture and capitalist development suggests that feminist social reproduction theory – or FRST - (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 1998; Ferguson, 1988; Laslett & Brenner, 1989) which argues that 'patriarchal relations both shape and are shaped by the economic dynamics of dispossession and accumulation' (Ferguson, 1988, p. 87) might be a useful starting point for further research. FSR theorists have argued that neo-liberal capitalism has dictated a retreat of the state, re-privatizing the costs associated with maintaining social reproduction. Capital's need for ever more flexible and low-cost workers has created 'opportunities' for women as a surplus army of labour in factories, paid domestic roles, part-time and precarious work. But gendered differentiation and inequality within the labour force have been correspondingly reproduced, as have male biases in public policy formulation, global and paid domestic labour hierarchies, individualized governmentality, and the erasure of the paid/unpaid work boundary as new forms of precarious and informal work evolve, with the impacts being felt most acutely by lower-middle and working class women (Bakker & Gll, 2003; Elson, 2009; Hatem, 1976, p. 233; Sehgal, 2005, p. 2287), a depiction which maps well onto our findings in this study.

We would suggest then that the Tunisian case presented here demonstrates that research on, and understandings of, women working in the transport sector should not be marginalized to sector-specific discussions, but is part of, and contributes to, a much larger set of debates about gender, development and capital. The narratives of 'too rough, too hard and too dirty' that characterize female employment in the transport sector, whether in Tunisia or elsewhere and whilst pervasive and obstructive, should not be mistaken for the cause of women's exclusion but rather as symptoms of a deeper structural condition in the contemporary political economy.

Notes

1. XXXXXXXXX.
2. Société Nationale des Transport.

3. Société du Métro Léger de Tunis.
4. Société des Transports de Tunis.

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