

The Social Reproductive Roots of Agrarian Contention: Gendered Labor amid Peasant Struggles in Tunisia

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Abstract: This paper revisits the Tunisian 2010–2011 uprising and its ensuing decade of agrarian contention as a crisis of social reproduction stemming from the combined effects of depletion and dispossession. It traces the lineages of the grievances that continue to animate the Tunisian countryside to the multiple and often enmeshed labours—both productive and reproductive—of peasant and rural women. In underscoring the interconnectedness between these labours and the ebb and flow of various contestations against depletion and dispossession, it recognises social reproduction as a site of deep exploitation as well as an arena of day-to-day struggle. Guided by social reproduction theorisations and leveraging a multi-sited ethnography conducted during July and August 2023, this paper relies on participant observation/observant participation and unstructured interviews conducted with predominately landed and landless peasant women, the testimonies of whom serve as a conduit for an important dialogue between feminist materialist analyses of social reproduction and peasant movements.

خلاصة: تعيد هذه الورقة النظر في انتفاضة تونس ٢٠١٠-٢٠١١ وما تلاها خلال عقد من الزمن، من استياء داخل المجال الريفي، كإزمة إعادة إنتاج اجتماعي ناجمة عن التأثيرات المتداخلة لكل من عمليات الاستنزاف والنهب. تتبع الورقة مسارات المظالم التي لا تزال تحرك الريف التونسي وأعمال الفلاحات والنساء الريفيات المتعددة والمتشابكة في كثير من الأحيان، سواء على مستوى الإنتاج أو إعادة الإنتاج. من خلال التأكيد على الترابط بين هذه الأعمال واتجاهات المد الجزر في مختلف الاحتجاجات ضد استنزاف الموارد ونهبها، تعترف هذه الورقة بالإنتاج الاجتماعي كموقع للاستغلال العميق وكذلك كساحة للنضال اليومي. مسترشدة بنظريات الإنتاج الاجتماعي ومعتمدة على إثنوغرافيا متعددة المواقع أجريت خلال شهري جويلية وأوت (يوليو/تموز وأغسطس/آب) ٢٠٢٣، تعتمد هذه الورقة على الملاحظة بالمشاركة والمقابلات غير المهيكلية التي أجريت مع الفلاحات المالكات للأراضي منهن وغير المالكات، شاهدة على حوار مهم بين التحليلات النسوية المادية للإنتاج الاجتماعي والحركات الفلاحية

Keywords: social reproduction, contention, peasants, Tunisia

Introduction

At five o'clock in the morning, on a tranquil farm nestled in *Chrifet*—an enclave on the outskirts of the city of Slimane in Northeast Tunisia—Aisha,¹ a peasant farmer, made her way toward her animal shed, located adjacent to her late father's homestead where she had spent her entire life. With a plastic bucket clutched in her grasp, she was en route to milk her dairy cow, a recent mother who had given birth a mere three weeks before my immersion into Aisha's world for the inaugural week of my dissertation fieldwork. We entered the stable

together, casting our gaze over an assembly of animals, each named after her favourite Turkish soap opera starlets. To my eyes, the stable seemed not to have been cleaned for days, with heaps of manure strewn across the concrete floor. Initially, Aisha harboured concerns that the potent smell might overwhelm me, prompting her to suggest that I linger outdoors while extolling my resilient stomach. I insisted on standing by her side. However, in the most impartial tone I could muster, I did inquire about the less-than-pristine state of the shed.

Using the mound of bovine excrement proximate to us as a visual aid, Aisha delivered a comprehensive lecture through which she diagnosed the Tunisian livestock sector and, in broader strokes, the prevailing state of Tunisian agriculture. With insights ranging from hues to textures and even volumes, Aisha linked these facets to assorted ailments afflicting the sector: a surge in livestock feed costs, a consequence of monopolistic markets further exacerbated by the Russia–Ukraine war, which compelled her to nourish her cow with freshly harvested grass exclusively; a parallel escalation in hay prices aggravating the former concern; and the relentless onslaught of scorching heat, stemming from erratic weather patterns, unsettling the animals' digestive equilibrium. Having a keen understanding of global and local dynamics, Aisha situated herself amid these connections, concluding with an insight that has long been central to feminist political-economic thought: the difficulties brought on by the compounding circumstances have turned her day-to-day work, particularly the maintenance of the shed and care for the animals, into an increasingly arduous task.

Tunisia's agricultural sector is woven with threads of complexity: the nation's long-term and deleterious reliance on cheap grain imports, fluctuating input pricing set against the background of volatile global markets, and a lack of any environmental safeguards in the face of the unfolding climate emergency. These contentious junctures have been pivotal, catalysing a sequence of grassroots mobilisations with a distinct peasant essence that mushroomed with the eruption of the 2010–2011 uprising (Gana 2012). Since 2011, protests have been widespread, most concentrated in the peripheral regions of the country, ranging from land occupations and sit-ins to individual and collective acts of self-immolation (FTDES 2014a, 2016, 2018, 2021). These events stand as potent reminders of the shortcomings of neoliberal development schemes and state negligence (Zemni 2021), and on a more profound level, the extractive essence of regionally lopsided capital accumulation, that have left the inlands depleted for the benefit of the more prosperous coasts (Ayeb and Bush 2019).

It is within this crucible of struggles that Aisha's discourse draws its essence, resonating with the very repertoires of contention that have been etched into the manifestos, chants, and slogans of these movements. Despite this resonance, Aisha herself has remained an observer rather than an active participant in any organised protest movement. At the same time, Aisha is one of many within Tunisia whose daily productive and reproductive labours have become increasingly precarious as a result of contradictions that have sown the seeds of continuous discontent. Indeed, across Tunisia and beyond its borders, men and women in various rural households and communities lead lives of substantial material need; not only is their ability to sustain themselves through land progressively

diminishing, but they also face ever fewer avenues for sustainable extra-farm work. These challenges manifest in depleted daily consumption and growing food insecurity, poor working conditions, hindered access to land and the commons, limited transport infrastructure, as well as constrained opportunities for healthcare and education.

Social reproduction, which encompasses the activities, institutions, social relations, and resources vital for the daily maintenance and intergenerational renewal of households and communities, is itself in crisis.

Drawing from Aisha's and others' lived experiences, this paper examines how this crisis of social reproduction (Fraser 2017)—expressed through dispossession and depletion—manifests in the daily productive and reproductive labours of peasant women. This exploration then propels us to establish the profound interconnectedness between their various labours and the ebb and flow of popular contention that has permeated Tunisian streets—and, by extension, the women's lives—since the events of 2010 when an uprising erupted from the rural and state-neglected enclaves of Tunisia. To this end, I draw upon the notion of social reproduction *as labour inherently imbued with contention*. This framework provides a lens through which to examine the labour dynamics of these women's lives as they engage in labour that has not only become increasingly untenable but also remains paradoxically indispensable to the functioning of the capitalist economy (Bakker 2007; Vogel 2013).

Against the backdrop of a globally interconnected capitalist mode of production, a prevailing argument among feminist scholars asserts that undertaking the *labours of social reproduction* (Naidu 2023) under circumstances inherently adversarial to it is tantamount to engaging in contested labour (Meehan and Strauss 2015). This reading dovetails with analyses showcasing the interplay between reproductive labour and the contradictions of capital accumulation, in that capitalism relies on social reproduction while simultaneously denying it (Federici 2012; Fraser 2016; Katz 2001). Within this intricate push-and-pull between interdependence and denial, the domain of social reproduction emerges as an arena of dynamic, day-to-day struggle. Guided by this analytical framework and positioned within the heart of agrarian Tunisia, the birthplace of the 2010 uprising, I argue that the Tunisian uprising and its ensuing decade of contention should be understood as a crisis of social reproduction and that comprehending peasant and rural movements, their grievances and aspirations, remains incomplete without a meaningful engagement with the interrelated notions of social reproduction as contested labour and social reproduction as an arena of day-to-day struggle.

An Ethnography of Social Reproduction

Leveraging multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted in July and August 2023, the study unfolds across three diverse locales in Tunisia: Slimane (North-east), Sidi Bouzid (Centre), and Gabes (South)—each characterised by distinct land and labour configurations and were chosen purposefully to connect regional variety to different production regimes. Amid these various labour and land

ownership structures and crop and climatic variations, a common thread emerged across these three sites: an enduring peasant spirit interweaved with differing degrees of contentious events, expressed mainly in demonstrations, sit-ins, collective and individual self-immolations, among other street-based displays of discontent.²

My research participants included landed peasant farmers, home-based workers specialising in petty commodity production and produce transformation, and landless and land-poor peasants who venture outside the home for waged labour on commercial farms. The selection of research participants followed both purposeful and snowballing approaches: a strategic entry point was gained through existing networks of civil society activists and politically engaged, as well as less politically involved peasants and small-scale farmers. This foundation, cultivated through previous research endeavours, facilitated my introduction to each site. As I progressed in my ethnography, the constellation of interlocutors broadened organically; my interview list (Appendix 1) reflects these newly forged relationships.

Across the three sites, my involvement was characterised by *observant participation* embedded within my interlocutors' daily routines. This immersive approach was complemented by the cultivation of connections through both social and labour interactions, culminating in unstructured interviews often conducted as the day drew to a close or amidst social gatherings. In the course of my conversations with my interlocutors, we discussed the intensity and multiplicity of their labours, all set against the backdrop of many challenges, most timely of which were the recurrent disruptions in both water and electricity supply—a nationwide issue that was exacerbated by the extreme heatwave of summer 2023 and was particularly pronounced in the hinterlands of Tunisia where these women and their families resided.

Grounding my observant participation in the range of on- and off-farm work activities present within each distinct field site—encompassing tasks such as soil preparation, weeding, planting, animal care, household upkeep, cooking, water retrieval from nearby wells, foraging, and even childcare in certain instances—serves as a conduit for a dialogue between social reproduction as my guiding theoretical framework as well as “literatures related to embodiment; multiple forms of materiality (including human/nonhuman); and the intricate forms of economic life and provisioning that occur in households and communities” (Parker 2015:119). Indeed, as I had come to appreciate through my ethnography and later as I digitised and reflected on my field notes, my interlocutors' attitudes towards, opinions of, and complaints against an array of human and more-than-human actors, from their relatives to their livestock, to the climate, to agricultural and worker unions, to the state, emerged amid the daily tasks we performed together, or which they did in my presence. The value of capturing these in-situ, labour-triggered grievances as they unfold organically acknowledges and seeks to remedy the potential blind spots within social reproduction theories, which have, at times, obscured the “nitty-gritty of material life” (ibid.). This ethnographic approach also dovetails with calls from geographers and labour ethnographers who explain that “[g]iven that several types of work remain unwaged,

unrepresented, and marginalized, we ask for careful ethnographic mapping to find the many invisible subsidies that subaltern lives provide the social reproduction of capitalism” (Chari and Gidwani 2005:273).

The Labours of and Struggles for Social Reproduction

The concept of social reproduction has experienced a remarkable resurgence within scholarly and activist circles, with a *Monthly Review* (2018) editorial recognising the revival as “one of the most remarkable attempts to extend historical materialism in our time”. Wages of Housework scholars including Dalla Costa and James (2018 [1972]) and Fortunati (1981) have intervened to show how women’s domestic labour subsidises capitalist production while calls for its remuneration spilled onto the streets. Later works spanned more expansive frontiers, including feminist correctives to Marxian perspectives on women’s oppression under capitalism (Vogel 2013), processes of primitive accumulation (Federici 2004), international division of labour and uneven development (Mies 1998), and ecological degradation (Mies and Shiva 1993). These and more interventions came together to build a unitary theory of gender oppression—as Ferguson (1999:4) explains—one which “could avoid the pitfalls of economic reductionism and functionalism if its material foundations were conceived as social and historical, not abstract, narrowly-defined economic relations”.

Contemporaneous analyses have continued along this tradition in tackling the gendered, racialised, caste-based, and predominantly unpaid essence of the daily and generational production of people’s lives (Bhattacharya 2015; Fraser 2017; Mezzadri et al. 2022). These studies aim to revalorise what is often perceived as marginal to economics at best and deemed valueless at worst (Bhattacharya 2017). Stretching beyond the confines of the household-family domain as the only site of social reproduction (though retaining its importance), current debates have also examined how transnational systems of accumulation rely on cheap migrant labour and reshape global gendered labour regimes (Parreñas 2015). They have also endeavoured to demonstrate that the commodification of reproductive labour and the infiltration of market logics into previously non-commodified realms represent capitalism’s pursuit of novel forms of subsidy (Fraser 2016). The withdrawal of state support, characterised by reduced public provisioning and welfare, or what Katz (2011:50) describes as “[d]isinvestment in social reproduction ... [as] a key means of accumulation by dispossession”, has become a point of attention in the current neoliberal era (Bakker and Gill 2003). Similarly, the global and local redistribution of care resources exacerbates fragility within systems essential to social reproduction, resulting from underfunding and privatisation spurred by international financial institutions (Stevano et al. 2021:181).

The domain of social reproduction—its various labours and institutions—are not geographically uniform, are historically and culturally specific (Arruzza 2016; Sehgal 2005), and can—as the case of Tunisia will soon demonstrate—vary even within the same national boundaries. Scholars focusing on Southern economies have endeavoured to understand social reproduction through differences in (re)

production regimes, with comparative case studies proving particularly insightful. In contexts that have not experienced a welfare state, social reproduction work is externalised onto families and communities as a subsidy for production (Mezzadri 2019). Similarly, in subsistence economies characterised by minimal public provisioning and precarious work arrangements, land and the commons emerge as resources for and—in their own right—institutions of social reproduction (Naidu 2023). As such, land expropriation can inhibit communities from developing complementary activities to offset precarious working conditions. The importance held by non-waged means of reproduction, with land at the forefront, as posited by Naidu and Ossome (2016), disrupts the conventional division between productive and reproductive spheres. In contexts where the home is both the social factory as well as the base for subsistence endeavours, petty commodity production and produce transformation render the two spheres of production and reproduction inseparable (exemplified in Mies' [1982] study of women lace-makers in India; see Mezzadri and Majumder 2022:1811).

Revisiting the example of Aisha and her animal shed in Slimane, Northern Tunisia, how can we differentiate the time and energy she invests in milking her cow for household needs from that expended when milking surplus? Correspondingly, animals fulfil dual roles within her animal shed—some cater to subsistence requirements, while others are destined for the market. How do we effectively comprehend the labour dedicated to their care and maintenance? In peasant economies, where subsistence needs are frequently met in tandem with market-driven production, the two spheres are, therefore, in the words of Naidu (2023:94), “ontologically unified, and often empirically and spatially indistinguishable”. Instead of operating in clearly demarcated public and private spheres, what Naidu (2023:94) dubs the “labors of social reproduction” recognise the multiple labour processes that overlap and coexist with waged labour that defy spatial disentanglement whilst allowing for local specificity. It is precisely this understanding of social reproduction that animates the present paper.

Naidu's work propels African-centred perspectives on social reproduction within agrarian economies of which key contributions include O'Laughlin's (2008, 2013) research in Southern Africa, Mbilinyi's (2016a, 2016b) studies on Tanzanian agrarian change, and Ossome and Naidu's (2021) work on Zimbabwean land reform. These works adopt a feminist political economy lens to explore relations, processes, and means of production and reproduction, underscoring land, labour, and livelihoods triad in ensuring the self-sustaining nature of peasants' (re)production regimes (Mbilinyi 2016b:116). These analyses are set against the backdrop of contemporary struggles over the (re)organisation of these regimes (Mbilinyi 2016a)—struggles that have intensified with the integration of rural small producers into global commodity chains (also see Moyo and Patnaik 2011), as well as processes of agrarian reform that no matter how conceivably radical, can still induce gender-lopsided integrations in land-labour systems (Ossome and Naidu 2021).

The concept of social reproduction as a terrain of struggle has evolved from diverse theoretical and political streams and has been enriched by the contributions of local and transnational feminist movements engaged in anti-capitalist,

agro-ecological, and anti-imperialist struggles both within and outside of Africa (Guérin et al. 2021). A few examples of these include East African women-led anti-colonial movements, in which, Ossome (2021:48) argues, forms of resistance reclaiming care mirrored the women's "relationship to key resources that were central to the colonial capitalist accumulation project—land and labor—and their struggles took on an agrarian form because they affected the overall political and economic structure of the colonial state". Through these struggles, women "articulated an anti-imperialist critique of gender (gendered labor) as a buffer against capitalist accumulation, which in turn have been directed by claims on public land and the commons" (Ossome 2021:49). More recent iterations of women harnessing the exploitative nature of gendered labour for emancipatory goals can be seen in the cases of Cambodian anti-dispossession mobilisations (Joshi 2022) as well as mobilisations against extractivist ventures in Turkey (Medeiros Ribeiro 2023). Within the context of the Ugandan sugarcane protests, peasant women instrumentalised their bodies as a tool of dissent when they unveiled their breasts in front of governmental officials in protest of a land grab deal, shouting, "If you bring sugar here, our breasts will have no milk to feed ourselves" (Martiniello 2015:662). A similar (though not recent) contentious episode can be found in the Niger Delta when several thousand women disrobed in protest of the destruction of their water, land, and other communal resources (Turner and Oshare 1993; see also Federici 2012). It is these debates, and intersecting debates in this Symposium, from which the present paper draws its analytical inspiration and within which it advances the understanding of social reproduction as a terrain of struggle at the root of the Tunisian uprising and its ensuing decade of discontent.

Agrarian Tunisia on the Eve of Uprising and Beyond

Across much of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the agrarian dilemma has emerged from decades of market-led policies, rural underdevelopment, conflict- and warfare-induced destruction, environmental degradation, and climate change (Bush 2016). With speculative capital becoming increasingly mobile, rural spaces in the MENA region have progressively succumbed to commodification for value generation, restructuring in the process, economic and social life while amplifying historical inequalities (Rignall and Atia 2017:5). Massive land transfers facilitated the rise of extractive industries and the expansion of export-oriented agriculture in Tunisia (Fautras and Iocco 2019). Coupled with the state's retreat from supporting small-scale agriculture, such transformations impeded rural people's ability to access and use land and restricted access to the commons, prompting mutations in livelihood strategies for smallholders (<5 ha)—who constitute 54% of Tunisia's farmers but own 11% of total agricultural land (FTDES 2020)—these strategies entailed the commodification of subsistence and higher levels of pluriactivity all set against precarious land tenure regimes. For the landless, these strategies often blended remittances from migrant labour and waged, often casual agricultural work. Rural–urban migration flows—most extreme in the predominately agrarian governorates of Tunisia—have created not

only gendered but also generational voids with predominately young men deserting agriculture in search of waged employment in the coastal service and tourism industries, a trend of socio-spatial transformation quasi-uniform across North Africa (Hanieh 2013).

The transformations in labour, social configurations, and ecosystems exhibit regional heterogeneity, offering insights into the gender-disparate consequences of agrarian reform evident in diverse labour ethnographies conducted from one region to another. In Sidi Bouzid, where commercial agriculture is practised extensively through leasing arrangements for water-intensive cash crops, casual and seasonal agricultural labour is feminised par excellence; as such, my fieldwork strategy led me to integrate myself on a commercial farm where women were most visible. On the other hand, in Gabes, women worked predominately within the home; my mornings were devoted to working within one such household, where each day, a farmer deposited bushels of *mulukhia* (jute leaves) to be cleaned. In both of these sites, the nature of this labour is characterised by monotony and repetitiveness and often labelled by landowning farmers as “unskilled”—attributes inherent to the feminised casual labourer archetype within Tunisia’s commercial agricultural system (Djerbi 2024).

Livelihood diversification, or livelihood fragmentation, fundamentally involves an intensification of social reproductive labour: as income deficits grow, social reproduction work steps in to bridge these gaps, ultimately leading to a reproductive squeeze. The “domestic economies” (Mies 1982) of Gabes wherein suitable employment opportunities for women and men alike are notably lacking illustrate how activities traditionally seen as reproductive and outside value-generating circuits enter the wage-generating realm while retaining a reproductive veneer. Consequently, these activities are poorly remunerated, confined within the household, and considered supplementary, if not an extension of women’s household chores. Likewise, in Slimane, the family-farming setup in Aisha’s world delineated an all-too-familiar division of labour: the men in her family—including brothers, brothers-in-law, and adult nephews—engage in off-farm endeavours, while their counterparts, comprising sisters, wives, and mothers, tend to the farm’s demands alongside their household work. The very landlessness or land poverty of the Sidi Bouzid farm workers who must venture out to work on commercial farms, has become synonymous with feminised rural poverty in Tunisia.

As the 2010 uprising loomed, rural poverty outpaced that of urban centres by a five-fold margin (Hanieh 2013). This disparity is accentuated by a squeeze on rural land, where a small concentration of mega-farmers (those with over 50 ha), comprising just 3% of Tunisian farmers, controlled slightly more than a third of the total agricultural land (Jouili 2017). Furthermore, in a nation where the replenishing of water reservoirs remains largely dependent on rain, Tunisia “suffers from a regional imbalance in available water resources. While the country’s northern regions enjoy 80% of surface water resources, the South claims a mere 5% of surface water” (Karaoud 2022). Against this backdrop, the simmering political ferment in the countryside, nurtured over decades, erupted with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, catalysing the Tunisian uprising. From these regions, resistance percolated before spreading to the country’s urban centres of power and

influence (Ayebe 2011; Hanieh 2013). In reassessing the “agrarian roots” of the uprising, scholars have rectified the urban bias prevalent in the early “Arab Spring” scholarship (Elloumi 2012; Gana 2012). Bouazizi, a native of Sidi Bouzid, was himself protesting the conditions of his family’s dispossession just months before his untimely death (Fautras 2015), joining others in demanding control over land, contesting indebtedness, advocating for essential resources like water, and challenging investment-driven agriculture (Ayebe and Bush 2019:70). The aftermath of the 2010 uprising not only catalysed one of the most consequential land reclamation movements in modern Tunisian history, epitomised by the struggle to reclaim the Jemna oasis (Kerrou 2019), but also paved the way for advocating dignified working conditions, equitable access to resources and subsidies, protection against market volatility, and measures to mitigate environmental degradation and address the climate emergency (Zurayk 2016).

Perhaps ironically, the Tunisian revolutionary process’ geographical trajectory conceals the same pathways of resource extraction and expropriation at its core. “Whether it is water, human resources, agricultural products or raw materials (phosphate, minerals, oil, gas, etc.)”, explain Ayebe and Bush (2019:61), “everything is extracted from peripheral regions and conveyed to the centre, where the resources are processed, consumed or exported”. Just as the fortunes of extraction seldom trickle down to their regions of origin in the form of development, political power has also eluded the hinterlands in the post-uprising era. For these communities, revolt is then both continuous and salient, with predominately young people taking to the streets to voice their demands, which continue to resonate, albeit with varying intensity across regions.³ In the forthcoming section, I posit that a fundamental drive to reclaim social reproduction is what animates the ongoing struggles shaping rural life. This perspective is often overlooked, however, because rural existence revolves around resources traditionally viewed solely as means of production and objects of contention rather than integral components of social reproduction. Viewed through this angle, we can better discern how the burdens of regionally skewed capital accumulation—manifested through depletion and dispossession—ultimately lead to crises in social reproduction.

The Social Reproductive Roots of Agrarian Contention

Social reproduction feminism posits that understanding the seemingly paradoxical relationship between capitalism and social reproduction lies in recognising this contradiction as “a generalized crisis of the system’s ability to reproduce itself, brought on by the depletion and decimation of social reproductive functions” (Bhattacharya 2017; see also Vogel 2013). Assaults on these functions and resultant crises of social reproduction transform the latter’s locus into a site of intense struggle (ibid.). In other words, while social reproduction ensures the continuation of capitalist social relations, it also holds the potential for their transformation (Norton and Katz 2017:1). In agrarian contexts—where guaranteeing a minimum subsistence level hinges on access to land and shared resources (Moyo and Yeros 2005; Naidu 2023)—such crises often arise from the inability to fulfil what Rao (2021) and Naidu and Ossome (2016; see also Ossome and Naidu 2021)

define as types of “indirect care” or acquiring the necessary inputs to ensure subsistence. Correspondingly, students of the agrarian South have emphasised the necessity to reinterpret the concept of social reproduction to encompass endeavours such as mobilising against land privatisation, agri-food commodification, and environmental degradation, as well as the fight for asserting rights to land, natural resources, and the commons (Federici 2011). It is within the context of such struggles—abundant in post-uprising Tunisia—that this section finds its point of entry.

Agrarian crises of social reproduction can result from various forms of dispossession—land and natural resources grabs, erosion of communal rights, displacement due to industrial projects, and market-driven agricultural policies. These conditions make it challenging for land- and commons-dependent households to generate surplus and produce essentials for their daily needs. In response to varieties of dispossession, resistance strategies wielded by peasants including the refusal to relinquish lands and homes on lands, and against privatising access to common resources within their communities become crucial for safeguarding means of social reproduction beyond merely generating agricultural surplus as suggested by Naidu and Osome (2016). In this vein, the occupation of state and privately held farms in the wake of the 2010 uprising—notably the Jemna oasis reclamation efforts—sought not only to rectify injustices from decades of land usurpation but also symbolised an assertion of the right to exist for peasants whom ancestral ties to land have been long denied (Ben-Slimane et al. 2020). In the tradition of national liberation land recovery movements, Jemna is one of over 100 private and state-owned farms that became the focus of rural resistance through occupations spurred by the Right to Land movement, spreading in the interior regions of Tunisia where vast expanses of untapped state lands coexist with high poverty rates (Zurayk 2016). Land activists and scholars of land struggles in Tunisia have emphasised the intrinsic value of land, viewing it not merely as a commodity for ownership and accumulation but as a cornerstone of collective identity, family heritage, and ancestral history. For them, land embodies a sense of belonging intertwined with feelings of “honour” (Ghrorbali 2022). The affective politics of these movements have led to their reinterpretation through the prism of the “politics of dignity” (*karama*)—enshrined in the uprising’s slogan for national dignity (Ayari 2011; Marzouki 2021). The moral claims directed at the state are inseparable from demands to improve material conditions, both arising from a desire to reclaim the means for decent livelihoods, ensure the generational transfer of cultural values tied to the land, and guarantee the reproduction of households and communities.

Struggles to reclaim the functions of social reproduction can equally stem from conditions marked by resource depletion or the discord between the demands placed upon social reproductive efforts and the resources allocated to support them. This breach of a critical sustainability threshold triggers adverse consequences for those engaged in undervalued work (Rai et al. 2014:88–89), and instances of such crises may be prompted by integrating extractivist capital practices that exhaust natural resources and disrupt ecological equilibrium, leading to long-term environmental degradation with deleterious ramifications on the

communities reliant on these ecosystems.⁴ In Tunisia, the extensive and regionally askew transfer of water and other natural riches, the expansion of irrigation agriculture and water-intensive and predominately export-oriented crops, and the competition of extractive industries over hydrological resources have exacerbated the already precarious water situation, with stark gender-disparate consequences evident in the intimate triad of gendered labour, care work, and water. The question of water has thus emerged as one of the most salient in Tunisia's current juncture, and as I will discuss later, has profound implications for the organisation of (re)production regimes in the sites I visited and continues to fuel dissent since the uprising. For instance, a mere two weeks following the ousting of Ben Ali, the residents of Chatt Essalem and neighbouring towns in Gabes blocked the industrial zone where the phosphate refinery is situated; they demanded compensation, decried its water siphoning and polluting, and disrupted its production for three months.⁵

The occupation of the industrial zone, the aforementioned Jemna oasis reclamation movement, and other notable moments of collective outrage carried out by the marginalised (for more examples, see Zemni 2021) are watershed events in the recent history of Tunisian popular contention. For the most part, they have been appreciated and studied in as much as they bring to the forefront of public consciousness the struggles of the country's working people (Yousfi 2021), their successes and shortcomings in organising on a collective level (Gana 2013), and the strategies they wield to disrupt oppressive structures. While significant in their own right, these street politics and their respective analyses leave an incomplete picture of how discontent simmers beneath the surface before erupting into the public arena, and how gender relations may mould trajectories and modalities of dissent. As Allal (2013:203) asserts, "Understanding the popular uprising in Tunisia, as anywhere else, requires a thorough analysis of the relations underpinning the sort of social life that may take place 'underground' or be partially hidden from view". Street politics epitomised by these public contentious episodes form part of a broader landscape in which the everyday *labours of social reproduction*—an underground arena par excellence—are integral and with which they are in constant dialogue. A granular examination of social reproduction as a site of recurrent, micro struggles as encapsulated by its labours is especially helpful not solely in the work of tracing lineages of popular discontent induced by the twin processes of dispossession and depletion but also in better understanding where and how peasant women in my field sites are situated in these processes.

Contention at the Margins: Gendered Labour amid Peasant Struggles

Students of "the everyday" valorise the mundane, routine, and taken-for-granted activities as an important site of politics making. Instead of brushing aside what are considered "personal frustrations", explains Salman (2021:17) in her examination of social reproduction in urban popular neighbourhoods of Tunis, "[s]mall incremental actions" accumulate to foster a collective sense of injustice and indignity, thereby transforming daily grievances, such as indignations about

inadequate schooling and housing, into “politically charged” affairs (Gökarksel 2016). The informal and devalued nature of rural women’s work has positioned them at the margins of contentious debates, as they, especially home-based workers, are cast primarily as “homemakers, mothers, and producers to the nation’s population, rather than recognising them as active citizens with legitimate claims on the state” (Elias and Rai 2019:209). The “seemingly pre-political, analytically trivial, and causally weightless” (Enloe 2011:447) domain of social reproduction thus presents itself as a space where state and global economic power are enmeshed, as well as a fertile site of struggle through which women constitute themselves as subjects of rights and not only bodies that perform care and reproductive work. The very politics of social reproduction—expressed through the everyday grievances of women as they go about their day—to borrow from Arruzza and Gawel (2020:6), “involve both the critique of oppressive, exploitative and extractive social relations and the reproduction of struggles capable of attending to material and intimate needs”.

With this in mind, I commenced my field research by asking my interlocutors what they considered to be the most pressing and immediate challenge in their lives. While the answers varied, a shared element resonated throughout—that of water access. I thus begin and situate my analysis within the context of this struggle which encapsulates the pursuit of a fundamental means for life’s reproduction. The water crisis has been decades in the making, and the water right has been one of the most persistently thorny issues levelled by several peripheralised regions—from Houaidia to Om Larayess, to Hafouz, and Chenini—in opposition to state negligence and the encroachment of commercial interests into their lives with the support of a burgeoning environmental civil society. The severity of the water crisis following the uprising was so dire that the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights coined 2014 as *sanat al-atash* or the “year of thirst” (FTDES 2014b). Subsequent years witnessed continued disruptions in water access that were met with ensuing resistance: in 2021 alone, the Tunisian Water Observatory recorded 423 movements denouncing water in-access (Observatoire Tunisien de l’Eau 2023), which was further exacerbated in the current year by ongoing droughts and escalating temperatures, culminating in the extraordinarily hot summer of 2023, which posed serious threats to people, crops, and livestock.

In response to water scarcity, the Tunisian government recently introduced “nation-wide” water rations. The implementation of these, however, has been markedly uneven across regions. While water cuts were relatively novel in urban centres, they were already widespread in the southern and inland areas of the country, where outages could extend for days (Gasteli 2023). Simultaneously, the Ministry of Agriculture enacted an irrigation water ban, to which Aisha—introduced at the beginning of this paper—expressed her frustration, lamenting, “They [the state] are cutting off water, but we know where it is really going—they are targeting us because we are an easy sacrifice” (Interview, Slimane, 1 July 2023).⁶ Aisha’s scepticism regarding national water management finds support in a 2020 report by the Ministry of Agriculture, which estimated that nearly 32% of water was lost within the National Company for the Exploitation and Distribution of Water (SONEDE) network, and around 40% in irrigation networks due to the

dilapidated state of the infrastructure (Gasteli 2023). Aisha's observation, noting the attribution of blame to small farmers, aligns with analyses that trace the water crisis back to state indifference regarding the declining condition of crucial infrastructure and extractivist projects siphoning water (Zaghdoudi 2023) as well as large-scale and investment agriculture (Rebei 2019).

The latter two can be seen in Gabes, where the struggle for water has become synonymous with the Chenini oasis and its historically inherited but barely surviving agroecological system. As a reminder, the oasis residents have for decades voiced the imminent threat of, in their words, "extinction" posed by the neighbouring industrial zone. The combined effects of pressures on natural resources and environmental degradation stemming from the spillage and gas expulsion of the industrial zone's chemical processing plants have shrunk cultivation areas, depleted groundwater, and contaminated the surrounding beaches, seawater, and air, making the conditions for life's reproduction tenuous at best.⁷ Industrial externalities have impacted social reproduction performed not only within the household; it also encroached on social reproduction under state purview: in 2017, students at a primary school adjacent to the industrial zone were asphyxiated upon the release of gas from the plants (Lac 2019). Children and adults alike are also affected by the constriction of outdoor recreational spaces: in the Ghanoush province, the quasi-uninhabitable beaches with their washed-up sea animal carcasses are an extreme example.⁸

My Chenini interlocutors frequently evoked the oasis' past, a topic that permeated discussions even when addressing present and immediate concerns. The mention of the oasis' historical spring, its vast networks of drains, and its once-formidable pumping power is akin to an initiation ceremony for newcomers, reflecting nostalgia for a bygone era whilst also bearing witness to viable futures of which younger generations were deprived. Another expression of this nostalgia emerged through oral histories recounting the oasis' past farming rituals—such as henna gathering, date harvesting, and the maintenance of water drains—where residents shared a tradition of reciprocal collaboration, helping neighbours when called upon and relying on them in return. With the rise of the industrial zone in the region, the drains deteriorated into receptacles for waste, date palm cultivation either consolidated under agribusiness or became untenable on smaller scales, and henna farming was progressively abandoned in favour of cash crops. Yet many of the then-communally shared labours did not simply disappear. Instead, they transformed into low-paying, menial tasks, some of which are now undertaken individually by women within their households, for a wage described by the young woman with whom I worked as "merely supplementary" (Interview, 5 August 2023).⁹

In Tunisia as elsewhere, the struggle for water is intimately tied to the struggle for access to land resources. For those who do not own land, ensuring subsistence presents a set of challenges that require a distinct set of adaptation-qua-survival strategies. A rich literature from Africa, most notably Naidu and Ossome's (2016) intervention, points to how the rural land-poor and landless are more dependent than the land-rich on free collection of goods from private and communal lands. Consider the landless workers of Sidi Bouzid, who are reliant on farmers to access

lands as mediated through their waged employment. In essence, women found a pathway to access resources that would otherwise be unavailable to them by virtue of their employment. This access was particularly crucial for necessities such as water, which they could obtain from wells on these private farms. This became even more significant given the frequent disruptions in water and electricity supply during my time in Sidi Bouzid outlined earlier. Workers, particularly those residing on the outskirts of Sidi Bouzid city, reported enduring days without access to either resource. In the mornings, they would arrive for work with empty containers hoping to fill them by day's end.

In addition to water, access to land facilitates foraging activities—while some of this foraging was negotiated with landowners, much of it was done covertly. Although my interlocutors were adamant that foraging was, in many respects, their right, the risk of repercussions loomed large. One interlocutor, Faten, put it this way: “We know we cannot forage when the *fallah* [farmer] is around, but he usually is not, so we collect some peppers and other vegetables discreetly. I know it does not harm him, and it helps me, even though I would not do it in his presence” (Interview, Sidi Bouzid, 2 July 2023). These acts may seem small, but their repercussions can be severe. On a scorching day after our work shift had concluded, nearing noon, a nearby *jebia*—a small reservoir of well water—offered a chance for Faten and I to wash our hands and refresh. When the noise of a passing car momentarily alarmed her, she instinctively ducked to hide, prompting me to do the same. Fortunately, it was a false alarm, but the incident prompted me to inquire about the potential consequences if the owner had caught us. Her response was succinct but poignant: “It wouldn't be a pleasant situation” (ibid.). I thus am careful not to romanticise Faten and others' covert foraging as an expression of resistance in the Scottian tradition. This foraging is, rather, part of a boarder set of strategies for survival, the tenability of which renders the labours involved in ensuring said survival a delicate struggle.

If anything, newly determined levels of consumption set against rising inflation in food prices have rendered this foraging a necessity. According to the 2015–2020 report from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), fruit and vegetable prices increased during this period by 135% surpassing the purchasing power of many Tunisians. With food accounting for nearly 30% of household expenditures on average, it surpasses housing, electricity, or water as the largest expense for Tunisian families (Karaoud 2022). The ability to access these lands for water and foraging—even if clandestinely—becomes a lifeline, though it remains entangled in gender and class-based inequalities; and relying on landowning farmers for water access limits opportunities to contest the labour abuses that fester within this line of work. This is especially the case considering that many women who do not live near farms require transportation so hazardous it has become the object of multiple national scandals (Djerbi 2022). The informal, seasonal, and precarious nature of labour further undermines the bargaining power of rural labourers: Remarkably, when I departed Sidi Bouzid, none of the workers had received their due wages for the duration of our time together, with some reporting unpaid wages from weeks leading up to my visit.

Decades of scholarship derived from land reform programmes—spanning the redistributive and radical hues—has recognised that bettering women’s position with the right to own and control land can act as a potent countermeasure against entrenched patriarchy and feminised poverty, potentially enhancing their bargaining power and status within and outside the household (Agarwal 1997; Levien 2017; Naidu and Osome 2016). The prospect of radical land reform with a gender justice agenda thus emerges as a way to rectify gender-based inequalities, especially in contexts marked by the absence of state efforts to meet the requirements of communities’ social reproduction (Moyo and Yeros 2005; Naidu and Osome 2016). O’Laughlin (2008:205) encapsulates this notion well in saying that given the uncertainties of waged employment, “a plot of land is, in many places, the best form of social security”. Historically, in Tunisia, this responsibility has been shouldered by basic welfare provisions and investments in the public health sector (Pfeifer 1999).¹⁰ However, these provisions have gradually diminished in the post-uprising period due to the imposition of loan conditions by international financial institutions, which target Tunisia’s already limited social safety net (Chandoul et al. 2022). One of my interlocutors, a landless worker in her late 50s with a foot injury and a sick husband, remarked, “I am not involved in any of these organisations or protest movements, and when people were protesting in front of the authorities in Sidi Bouzid, I did not go—they promised us welfare time and time again, after the *thawra* [revolution], they said I would be entitled to help from the government that never came” (Interview, 3 July 2023). Another woman of the same generation said, “Can you imagine? A woman my age working in the fields?” (Interview, Sidi Bouzid, 4 July 2023). None of the women I spoke with in Sidi Bouzid enjoy the benefits of any form of social security coverage. This mirrors the situation of landless agrarian labourers across various regions of the country, who often constitute the sole source of informal waged employment within their households.¹¹ The necessity of land reform in Tunisia cannot be overstated and is central to the demands of mobilising peasants and their allies; however, it remains uncertain how envisioned reforms may address—if at all—the inherent contradictions of social reproduction, or when gendered labour must step in to care for incapacitated family members in the absence of state-provided healthcare, for example.

The ramifications of the state’s retreat from the health sector are starkly evident in Gabes, where the industrial zone’s operations, coupled with regional disparities in investments in public health infrastructure, have precipitated a crisis marked by chronic and life-threatening illnesses. These ailments, which include cancer and various respiratory conditions, contribute to placing the burden of caring for a depleted population predominantly on women. Running parallel to these are the impacts of extractive activities on agriculture which across all of Gabes has been profound, manifesting in reduced and poor-quality output, as well as the dwindling participation of labour in the agricultural sector—a reality long recognised by Chenini residents and recently substantiated by a 2018 European Commission study on the environmental toll of industrial activities in the area (Commission Européenne 2018). For farmers situated proximate to the industrial zone, these externalities have also compelled them to resort to increased use of pesticides and

fertilisers to bolster crop resilience and mitigate losses at a detriment to their health and wellbeing.

These challenges notwithstanding, the determination of the oasis residents to remain on the land and their more overt confrontations against the encroaching activities of the industrial zone are a direct challenge to the circumstances of their gradual expulsion. Even if women are represented in minorities in the more overt acts of contention in Gabes (Robert 2021:7), the *labours of social reproduction* create the conditions for this resistance and make it possible. The same can be said in protests against water and electricity supply shortages that marred Sidi Bouzid during and beyond my fieldwork. Similarly, for peasants like Aisha the mere act of waking up every day and farming presents itself as an act of contesting the state: “The state is working against us [*fellahin* / farmers] and that is why agriculture in Tunisia is failing. I find myself working continuously often for little reward, but I still do it. I would rather starve than see my animals starving. So, I will wake up every day and weed for them. If I cannot buy them feed, weeding is all I can do at the moment, so I will make sure they are well fed even if it is not what they deserve” (Interview, Slimane, 1 July 2023).

Similar to the scenario of the Sidi Bouzid workers whose liberation from gender-based inequalities is not guaranteed by the promise of land reform, Aisha’s case is also one of many where even actual land ownership falls short in effectively lifting peasants across the gender divide out of poverty. To be sure, the sustainability of peasant households in such cases is still heavily dependent on the daily, waged and unwaged, and “sacrificial” qua exploitative labour undertaken by women; and land access in such cases remains confined within systems that skew masculine in terms of control over resources and market networks. This disadvantage takes a distinctly gendered turn when examining how the limited ownership percentage of women runs parallel with their gender-biased integration into (or rather exclusion from) farmers’ networks. These networks are, in Aisha’s case, crucial for accessing subsidised feed from the local farmers’ union which had rebuffed her requests on multiple occasions. Aisha, who is unmarried, relies on one of her nephews to procure hay from the market as well as another nephew to sell her produce at the market. Similarly, in a conversation with Aisha’s sister—who also owns a small plot—she explained that her husband, often accompanies her to better her chances at procuring fertiliser, despite her being the primary farmer in their household, whose plot is solely in her name, and him working in an entirely separate, non-agrarian sector.

In moments of collective mobilisation, small producers like Aisha, the informal farmhands of Sidi Bouzid lacking representation by any syndical body, and the home-based workers of Chenini find themselves on the periphery of these processes, echoing their equally marginal position in processes of market absorption. Accordingly, the role of rural women in these struggles remains largely obscured—as not to say entirely invisible because gender-segregated data for these protests are hard to come by whereas gender and contentious politics literature concerned with Tunisia has continued to struggle with a glaring urban-bias (ElHajjaji 2018; Mahfoudh Draoui and Mahfoudh 2014). It is therefore not entirely paradoxical that while the grievances fuelling waves of discontent in the Tunisian

rural landscape deeply resonate with women like Aisha and her sister, their voices remain inadequately represented in struggles closely tied to their daily experiences. During my fieldwork this summer, none of the women I spoke with have ever participated in any organised or spontaneous protests, despite articulating various forms of collective contestation and competing claims (Abrams et al. 2022:84)—which are at the very heart of the expressions of contention animating the sites I visited. While the specific causal mechanisms beneath this disparity warrant further exploration, micro-ethnographies of Tunisian social movement literature, such as Robert's (2021) work on environmental activism in Gabes and Ben Alia's (2019) examination of the Kairouan movement for regional development, lend support to the assertion that gender-based hierarchies entrenched in daily interactions and (re)production regimes ultimately shape the organisation of collective action. Put another way, while social reproduction fulfils the conditions for the continuation of life and, by extension, demands its improvement, it also engenders forces that relegate its primary agents to the margins of these dynamics—or at least how we are used to seeing them unfold on the streets.

Beginning with water and arriving at land—two cornerstones of rural social reproduction and objects of popular contention—this section explored how the pursuit for access to and maintenance of these manifests as a daily struggle, weighs disproportionately on those tasked with life's renewal. This burden is especially accentuated in regions where state presence has waned, extractive industries have proliferated, and market logics have encroached upon homes and livelihoods. Consequently, the pursuit of means for social reproduction and the labours of reproduction themselves assume a dual role: essential for sustaining life and a declaration of the right to exist. It would be remiss to romanticise or misinterpret this labour itself as a form of resistance. Rather, it proves more fruitful to think of these labours not only as encapsulating the possibility of tomorrow but also as a fundamental critique of the conditions of today (Arruzza and Gawel 2020). I then posit that inherent within this critique is a form of more subtle contentious politics—or contention at the margins—that emerges from the friction between capitalist reliance on social reproduction and its denial of it.

Conclusion

The conceptual work that has informed the paper started from my visit to Aisha's animal shed—arguably a microcosm of Tunisia's agricultural sector fraught with intersecting economic, political, and ecological tensions: Livestock deprived of increasingly pricey fodder, water inaccessibility, unviable work conditions, all set against depleted social provisioning and withdrawal of state support for small-scale agriculture. Symptomatic of pervasive conditions of dispossession and depletion—as I have attempted to show—these daily struggles observed in Slimane, Sidi Bouzid, and Gabes have and continue to motivate waves of contemporary discontent in these and other corners of the country's developmentally neglected “hinterlands”. Public and street-based performances of outrage and indignation over unmet revolutionary ideals appeal to a once-revolutionary moment, serving as a reminder of the nation's unfinished revolutionary trajectory.

At their core, these contentious moments also strive to reclaim the functions and possibilities of livelihoods that have been rendered untenable; yet seemingly against all odds, they continue persisting. This persistence is predicated on social reproduction—the realm of activities, resources, social relations, and institutions—that ensure the daily and generational renewal of individuals and communities. Reclaiming social reproduction is then at the root of these waves of contention.

In this paper, I posit that the social reproductive roots of contemporary agrarian contention in Tunisia are best traced through the multiplicity, intensity, and precariousness of the daily labours of a diverse group of peasant women I have shadowed and laboured in the aforementioned three sites. These labours, blending productive and reproductive lines, are deeply entangled in class-based, gendered, and generational axes of social differentiation and inequalities, making social reproduction a terrain rife with exploitation. For the land-poor and the landless, newly determined levels of consumption are competing with the imperatives of subsistence. On private farms in Sidi Bouzid—where a predominantly informal and exclusively feminised workforce labours for low wages—patriarchal and class-based hierarchies dictate resource access, indispensable for foraging and collecting water. Waged employment, though insecure, becomes crucial for accessing land to meet household demands, especially as inflation and volatile global food markets drive prices beyond the reach of households. Even those with land are not faring much better; reproductive labour fills gaps where market conditions undermine life's renewal. Similarly, in Gabes, where encroaching extractivist endeavours threaten people's health, children's education, crop production, underground and seawater, and other facets of daily life, social reproduction intervenes not only as a site of an essential subsidy for a state retreated from healthcare provisioning but also one which generates the conditions for contesting this very neglect.

In this way, social reproduction emerges as terrain of struggle. Embedded in the paradoxical relationship between capitalism's reliance on and simultaneous scorn for social reproduction is a contention that is rarely read in a way that takes seriously the question of gendered labour. Through this paper, I hoped to advance a corrective in the form of a feminist-grounded focus on rural contentious politics, guided by the tenets of social reproduction and positioned within the heart of agrarian Tunisia, the birthplace of the 2010 uprising. The intention is to catalyse a deeper dialogue between studies focused on rural and peasant issues and materialist-feminist thinking. While the uprising is commonly understood—and rightfully so—as a result of a crisis of neoliberal capitalism in literature dealing with the uprising's agrarian origins, a feminist reframing helps us recognise the significance of social reproduction, which offers an essential framework for addressing the challenges facing peasants in all corners of the majority world. Acknowledging the importance of this connection can open avenues for a feminist re-engagement with visions of agrarian and land reform proposed by coalitions of peasants and movements and hold the promise of charting a course towards more emancipatory futures.

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Endnotes

¹ Names of all research participants were changed to ensure anonymity.

² Gauging contention levels was conducted during my pre-fieldwork phase, during which I examined off-the-shelf datasets related to conflict events in Tunisia. This primarily involved utilising Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), supplemented by locally sourced monthly reports on mobilisations and protest movements provided by the Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux (FTDES). This triangulation was deemed necessary due to the inherent biases of off-the-shelf datasets, which tend to overlook smaller episodes in regionally marginalised areas—a concern that has been elucidated by Clarke (2023) within the broader context of Middle East and North African events data.

³ As explicated above, this imbalance in the intensity of contention, measured (arguably narrowly) by the number of reported protests per year within each governorate, serves as the contextual background for this paper. Since 2010, the interior regions of the country have consistently exhibited higher levels of contention compared to their coastal counterparts, with the capital, Tunis, being the expected exception. This is a continuation of pre-2010 Tunisia's geography of contention, briefly discussed by Allal (2013).

⁴ See Fernandez (2018) for an empirical case study of such phenomenon utilising the dis-possession/depletion framework and situated in India.

⁵ Those engaged in the action included most prominently activists from the collective Stop Pollution, fishermen from Chatt Essalam and neighboring towns, among others.

⁶ All informal interviews were conducted in Tunisian Arabic. None of them were recorded, as they were predominately conversations that unfolded organically during work or while socialising, though I did jot down notes and important quotes as part of my fieldnotes which were then translated into English.

⁷ See Ben Saad and Paoli (2019) for a detailed discussion of the mutations of hydraulic resources in the oasis of Gabes.

⁸ While my primary fieldwork in the summer of 2023 focused on the oasis of Chenini, the insights presented here are derived from a visit to Ghanouch beach during a field-based summer school organised by the Tunisian Observatory of Food Sovereignty and the Environment in the summer of 2021.

⁹ The mention of the Chenini past here is not meant to evoke rural romanticism, and these communal activities were certainly not free from gendered hierarchies. I do not claim that the lives of women in Chenini decades ago were considerably better or free from

patriarchal domination. Instead, the intention is to demonstrate how the intersecting effects of existing gendered hierarchies and capitalist transformations have yielded gender-differentiated outcomes and induced mutations in both productive and reproductive labour.

¹⁰ There is an important debate between social reproduction theorists working in and on Northern contexts and feminist political economists drawing from Southern experiences in the majority world regarding the appropriateness of incorporating state provisioning into discussions about diminished social reproduction capacities, especially in regions where the state has historically not played such a significant role (see, for example, Naidu 2023). While Tunisia significantly diverges from Northern contexts in terms of public provisioning and the welfare state model, and despite never attaining a baseline comparable to other regions, Tunisia's retreat from even its modest provision stands out notably in both substance and the associated struggles it has triggered. This is particularly evident in the context of post-uprising neoliberal intensification, primarily under the tutelage of the International Monetary Fund. The latter has consistently applied pressure on post-uprising governments to reduce subsidies for food and energy as well as curb spending on education and healthcare in the form of loan conditionalities which have become the subject of considerable discontent (see Djerbi 2023).

¹¹ As a 2023 report (in Arabic) from the Forum Tunsien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux (FTDES) makes clear; see <https://ftdes.net/ar/la-main-doeuvre-agricole/> (last accessed 9 July 2024).

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Appendix 1

List of Research Participants

Participant	Region	Age	Gender	Profession	Land Status	Interview Code
Aisha	Slimane	57	Woman	Peasant farmer	>2 ha	1
Saoussen	Slimane	48	Woman	Peasant farmer	>2 ha	—
Eljia	Slimane	<70	Woman	Peasant farmer	<2 ha	—
Faten	Sidi Bouzid	16	Woman	Student; agricultural worker	Landless	2
Faouzia	Sidi Bouzid	60	Woman	Agricultural worker	Landless	3
Salha	Sidi Bouzid	55	Woman	Agricultural worker; home-based worker	Landless	4
Arbia	Sidi Bouzid	<50	Woman	Agricultural worker	Landless	—
Souad	Gabes	<50	Woman	Home-based worker	Landless	—
Najet	Gabes	>18	Woman	Student; home-based worker	Landless	5

Note: Participants who do not have corresponding codes still participated in the research process either through informal conversations that have helped strengthen the foundations of this paper and/or have welcomed me to shadow them or labour alongside them.