



## 'No place for a woman': Access, exclusion, insecurity and the mobility regime in grand tunis

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### A B S T R A C T

Drawing on an innovative peer researcher method, this paper uses mobility diaries and in-transit interviews to examine the everyday travel experiences of women from socio-economically marginalised neighbourhoods in metropolitan Grand Tunis. It situates those experiences, and the practices they deploy to navigate them, within a *meso*-level discussion of women's social condition in Tunisia and a macro-level political economy of the Tunis transport system. Together these shed light on the multi-layered intersecting disadvantages which shape women's place in the prevailing mobility regime, pushing already marginalised women into transport poverty and social exclusion. The paper highlights the subsequent constraints on women's access to the resources which might allow them to improve their lives, and the significance of travel-related violence and insecurity on their everyday lives.

### 1. Introduction

Equitable transport and the mobility it affords play a critical role in ensuring socially sustainable development, determining opportunities for employment, trade, health provision, education and social cohesion (ITF, 2019: 3). However urban transport systems largely fail to accommodate women's specific transport needs (Peters, 2001; Sánchez de Madariaga, 2013b: 46; Grieco, Pickup and Whipp, 1989). This transport discrimination is particularly intense and impactful in the fast-growing cities of the global South, where it exacerbates inequalities, and compounds multiple insecurities arising from poverty, unemployment, and unsafe infrastructures.

This paper explores the everyday experiences of women's engagement with the transport system in one such city. It draws on ethnographic and interview data gathered from two marginalised sites in the metropolitan area of Grand Tunis. To derive meaning from these experiences, it locates them first within a *meso*-level discussion of the social 'condition' of women in Tunisia, foregrounding the inequality and

insecurity which mark their collective lives. It further locates them within the historically contingent specificities of the local transport system, itself a product of the macro-level political economy of the city. The micro, meso and macro levels combine such that women from marginalised socio-economic neighbourhoods experience a multi-layered set of constraints on their mobility. The paper shows how they manifest agency with behaviours deployed to navigate these constraints, as well as the ultimately exclusionary outcomes for their participation in the local political economy. In doing so it illustrates arguments that access to transport can best be understood as access (or otherwise) not just to a transport system itself but to the possibilities it represents or inhibits. It further seeks to illustrate how the broader political economy that shapes the transport system thereby acts as an impediment to the mobility required by such women for sustainable development to include them and draw upon them.

The paper begins by reviewing insights from feminist studies, mobilities literature, and research on transport systems in urban Africa, bringing us to the concept of a mobility regime which is sensitive to the

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political economy of the city, manifest in transport provision. Everyday political economy provides an appropriate methodology for allowing us to investigate women's transport experiences and recognise their agency in navigating, and in turn shaping, that political economy at the local level. The paper sets out the innovative peer-researcher data collection process through which this was done. A review of the gendered inequalities which derive from patriarchal social norms and which compound socio-economic disadvantage is followed by an historically-situated political economy of the Tunis transport system. The paper then draws on the field data to examine how women from marginalised areas experience mobility and their agency in navigating it. Finally, and with reference to the broadened understanding of access that is found in literatures linking transport poverty with social exclusion, the paper concludes with an evaluation of the part played by the Tunis transport system in a mobility regime which impacts women's participation in, and contribution to, development in the local political economy. The importance of their vulnerability to violence and physical insecurity is high-lighted as a particularly exclusionary mechanism.

## 2. Transport, development and women's mobility

Feminist research in the 1970s identified the gendered dimensions of transport, especially relating to *transport to work* and *mobilities of care* (Hodgson, 2011; Sánchez de Madariaga, 2013a), demonstrating the impact to be heaviest for women in lower socio-economic groups (Allen, 2018: 14). Differentials were most apparent in developing countries where women experience inequalities in accessing and using transport, in their safety while doing so, and in the expectations which surround their mobility (Turner and Fouracre, 1995; Grieco and Turner, 1996; Mazumder and Pokharel, 2019; Neupane and Chesney-Lind, 2014). Many of the particular travel burdens on women in developing countries derived from disproportionate reliance on public transport services which were themselves the result of hurried and poorly resourced planning taking little account of women's particular transport needs (Borker, 2022: 1). The resulting limited spatial interactions of women constituted 'one of the most serious socio-economic problems engulfing the sustainable livelihoods of women' (Odufuwa, B. et al, 2012).

Recognition of the social embeddedness of women's use of transport meant acknowledging the intersectionality and diversity of users (Cresswell, 2010; Sheller and Urry, 2004). Not only did women's mobility needs and travel patterns differ significantly from male counterparts, but issues relating to access, (including cost, coverage, frequency and comfort) were differentiated by factors such as place of residence or socio-economic status. Women already subjected to socio-economic deprivations were more heavily impacted by transport disadvantages. Lucas et al (2016) importantly argued that transport disadvantage on its own does not necessarily impact negatively on women with other financial and human capital resources. But insufficient access to appropriate and affordable transport, *combined with* social and economic marginalisation, create a perfect storm in which individuals must choose (if they can) between social isolation (immobility) or time poverty (spending excessive and exhausting amounts of time trying to be mobile). The intersection of transport disadvantage and social disadvantage constitute transport poverty. Accessibility in this context is not just about access to transport *per se*, but the access, which is denied by transport poverty to life chances, social networks, social capital, goods, services and decision-making. Lucas et al. further suggest that transport poverty and resulting social exclusion arise within the context of mutually-impactful a) economic and political structures; b) governance and decision-making frameworks and c) social norms and practices. Advocates of transport justice therefore argue that transport planners, managers and operators are better advised to focus on enhancing equitable transport access rather than efficient movement (Martens, 2017, on reversing the under-representation of women in decision-making roles in order to put women's transport needs onto governance and decision-making agendas ((Odufuwa et al, 2012) and on

building acknowledgement of socio-cultural factors which reproduce inequalities among transport users into their planning. Mimi Sheller takes us a step further, suggesting that mobility - and restrictions on it - remake both spaces and subjects, giving them new political meanings, the substantive values of which need to be considered and disrupted in order to produce a more just mobility regime (Sheller, 2018: 28-29).

The mobilities turn expanded the field of vision 'from the body to the global' (Hannem et al, 2006: 1-22) guiding us to identify *mobility regimes* "that govern who and what can move (or stay put), when, where, how, under what conditions and with what meanings" (Sheller, 2018:11). But it has not lost sight of the body itself: other research has foregrounded the corporeal inequalities manifest in women's physical insecurity while mobile and which restrict their equitable access to transport (ITF, 2019). The two dimensions of travel safety - safety from accidents and safety from violence - are both heavily gendered. Intersections of transport and social disadvantage have multiplier effects on women's safety, adding to the insecurities marking out the lives of vulnerable communities (Borker, 2022: 3, Gough et al, 2016).

If the concept of the mobility regime privileges the social attributes of the moving individual, political economy approaches to transport have conventionally focused on *transport systems* which comprise formal institutions and planning processes, network design, investment, ownership, regulation and pricing, (Klopp, 2012) although there is a growing appreciation of the role and effects of new, heterogeneous and often informal actors (Glaeser and Ponzetto, 2018; de Borger, 2018:1-3; Sing and Wallack, 2011; Obeng-Odoom, 2009). To reconcile this expanding notion of a transport system with the notion of a mobility regime, we can look at the added complexities at play in the cities of the global South. Southern urban transport systems exhibit specific and evolving features: rapid growth and the significance of informal economies running alongside formal economies; the resulting patch-work of transport providers servicing the needs of disparate social groups; multi-layered, multi-agency systems of governance; the spatial disconnects of urban sprawl and poly-nucleated urbanisation; the salience of the rural-urban continuum as a meeting space for tradition and modernity; the diversity which accompanies accelerated local change and the pace of global interconnectedness, and extreme levels of poverty and inequality (Neube and Lufumpa, 2017; Brenner and Schmidt, 2011; Lall et al, 2017; Rizzo, 2017; Förster and Ammann, 2018).

This backdrop of systemic complexity is narrated as either one of creativity and innovative functional agency (Simone, 2005) or of chaos and disfunction (Davis, 2006) - or indeed something complex, precarious and shifting in between (Thieme, 2021). Such narratives, while pointing to the importance of the macro-level political economy, do not address the specificities of how cultural and normative environments and local economies impact on women specifically. But by referring back to the mobility regime, we come to the possibility that intersecting gender, socio-economic and spatial identities, when confronted with the particularities of transport systems in the global South, ferment multi-dimensional intersecting social and transport disadvantages and thus exclusion. The components of this mobility regime are entangled and mutually constitutive, always contingent, experienced differentially by individuals and comprise visible and invisible threads which link those with power to those without.

## 3. Everyday political economy as methodology

This paper positions the everyday experiences of women from socio-economically marginalised residential locations within the contexts of both the structures and norms of gendered inequality and the political economy of the transport system. This approach is already making its way into the study of transport in developing countries (Peters, 2001: 20, Xiao, 2019), urban life in Africa (Adebanwi, 2017) and women's mobility in urban environments (Møller-Jensen, 2021). Because everyday 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 users will both experience mobility differently and exhibit different patterns of behaviour than their male counterparts, as well as between themselves.

The data for this paper originates from an ESRC-funded GCRF project<sup>1</sup>, which initially examined the user and employment experiences and aspirations of young women in selected African cities, including the urban agglomerations of Grand Tunis. Youth was ideally taken as the 18–35 years bracket, although the ethnographic nature of research recognised subjects' self-identification as 'young' even when exceeding the upper limit. Ultimately, however, the data collected for the user strand was inclusive of women of all ages, both as observed subjects and as active respondents so this paper is not limited to consideration of 'young' women. Attention was focused on socio-economically marginal sites – one *peri*-urban, one near-rural. Site A in Tunis, a northern suburb of Grand Tunis (population approx. 300,000 people) is a dormitory location from which workers commute into or across Tunis. It is one of the least provisioned and most unsafe neighbourhoods in the city, a so-called *gourbiville* or unplanned area. Site B is a small rural town located 20 miles from central Tunis (population approx. 85,000). Employment here is split between local (largely female) agricultural work and employment in Tunis itself. Our ethical approval (Department of Anthropology, Durham University, 15.02.2019) prohibited identification of either site in this paper to avoid inadvertent identification of individuals. Despite their physical proximity to, and dependence on, the metropolitan centre, both sites are poorly connected, with only limited road infrastructures directing travellers through alternative transport hubs to reach downtown. Site A is known to be dangerous, a 'no-go' area for police and transport services alike. Site B feels remote and more rural than it really is. Both are considered to be socially conservative, in contrast to liberal wealthier parts of the city.

Data was collected principally through an innovative peer researcher method developed by the principal investigator (Porter, 2016). Six women between the ages of 22 and 36 were recruited, three from each research site, via community-based youth organisations. They were trained in practical and ethical aspects of interviewing and keeping mobility diaries. Over a two week-period, they each recorded their own daily transport experiences and interviewed at least 10 fellow-female travellers.<sup>2</sup> Since interviews were conducted *in transit*, they were informal, recorded via notes, and did not require biographic details of the interviewees. One of the merits of the peer researcher method is that the researcher is in some ways 'familiar' to the respondent, even if not personally known by virtue of their coming from the neighbourhood itself. Even so, respondents were unlikely to be comfortable giving biographical details in such a brief encounter. The diaries and interview notes were translated from the local Arabic into English by two Tunis-based project researchers, who were themselves conducting interviews with transport providers, women's organisations, government and municipal authorities, and international development agencies to develop our contextual understanding. The translation process was collaborative, the researchers checking with diarists that meanings were properly conveyed and details clear. The research team also consulted with the peer researchers as a group after all diaries and interviews had been collected, collectively reviewing the data and how meanings and significance should be attributed. In total each research site yielded 36 mobility diaries and 50 interviews. The peer researchers remained with the project throughout the subsequent stages of analysis, participating in

periodic meetings with transport sector stakeholders, observation of which also constituted project data, and in group reflections with the project investigators. This data collection method and the sustained dialogue allowed the bridging of power relations and positionalities of investigators and field researchers (Thieme, Lancione and Rosa, 2017). As co-producers, the peer researchers are all included here as co-authors. However, we have not indicated who conducted which interview, again to protect the *in-transit* interviewees from inadvertent identification. In an effort to resist the colonial tendency to speak over or for subaltern voices, we have tried here to include as many direct quotes from diarists and their interviewees as space allows.

A second *employee* strand involved semi-structured and unstructured interviews with 38 women and men working in the urban transport sector, including a range of drivers and ticket sellers. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews with male transport employees and female students were conducted as well as semi-structured interviews with union officials, employers, public transport organisations, development agencies and women's organisations. A country consultative group facilitated feedback from local public and non-governmental stakeholders. Data from this strand has helped to shape our understanding and interpretation of transport user responses but detailed discussion is reserved for a separate publication.

#### 4. Women, (in)equality, and disadvantage in Tunisia

Being female in Tunisia is itself a disadvantage. Post-colonial state-feminism, bolstered by elite women's activism, undoubtedly endorsed women's rights such that they enjoy a relatively advanced position in the MENA region (Kallander, 2021). However, this remained contingent on a corporatist étatist development strategy, patrimonial and ultimately repressive politics and was underpinned by regime endorsement of patriarchal norms. Since the 2011 Uprising, the monopoly of state feminism has given way since to multiple, independent feminist activisms (El Houssi, 2018; Yacoubi, 2016) but Moghadam has suggested that these have coalesced around high-profile and elite-led concerns such as women's constitutional status rather than strategies to address the grinding inequalities which accompany low female labour force participation and high unemployment on the one hand, and retrenchment of government services on the other (Moghadam, 2018: 3). The decline of women's situation can be seen in the fall in Tunisia's ranking in the Global Gender Gap Reports from 90th in the 2006 report to 120th in 2021 (out of 156 countries). Although 43% of girls proceeded to tertiary education in 2020, their labour force participation hovered at 25.5% (compared to a male rate of 68%) and less than 11% of senior professional employees were female. Female unemployment rates were almost double those of males and the majority of working women (58%) worked in the informal sector. Only 26.5% of women (compared to 34.3% of men) enjoyed comprehensive social protection (World Economic Forum, 2022; World Bank, 2022). Women in rural areas faced particularly high unemployment rates (35%) and female agricultural workers were paid around 50% less than male colleagues (Bajec, 2020). In politics too women are under-represented, with UNWomen noting that less than 25% of parliamentarians are female (UNWomen, 2023). Widespread barriers to entry remained, including rigid social expectations and gender roles, political violence targeting women, problematic media coverage, neglect of women's issues in political campaigns and a widespread mistrust among women of politicians and the political process. While surveys like the Arab Barometer (2022) indicate that a clear majority of Tunisians, both male and female, support the principle of equal rights for women, they also suggest that in reality women's lives are shaped by both unequal wages and work opportunities as well as a continuing social expectation that they carry the bulk of domestic and caring responsibilities. An Oxfam/AFTURD report in 2023 confirmed that Tunisian women still spend 33–50% of their day (anything from 8 to 12 h daily) doing unpaid caring or housework, compared to men spending just 3% of their time on such tasks (The New Arab, 2023). Such

<sup>1</sup> *Youth Engagement and skills acquisition within Africa's transport sector: promoting a gender agenda towards transitions into meaningful work*. Grant ESRC ES/S005099/1.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews are referenced in sequence relative to site, peer researcher, and the allocated number of the interview they conducted. Example, A2:4 would be the fourth interview conducted by the peer researcher 2 from Site A. Interviews with transport and other employees offer their gender and profession only.

chores include accompanying children and relatives to school and appointments, shopping, and otherwise travelling around the city. For women in marginalised areas which are poorly serviced by public transport, these additional burdens can be extraordinarily difficult and time-consuming.

## 5. The transport system in Tunis

The respondents in this project thus endure the multiple disadvantages presented by residence in marginalised parts of the city *and* by being female. To access public life they must navigate the extensive but dilapidated urban transport system of metropolitan Grand Tunis (population approx. 2.7 million) which is a product of early post-independence *étatist* ‘modernisation’ investment, cronyist ‘neo-liberal’ retrenchment and national economic stagnation.

The road and rail-based system was comparatively well developed for Africa during the decades following independence (1956), playing a significant role in the first president (Bourguiba)’s development agenda. But faltering economic growth and rising debt meant supply could not keep up with urbanisation-driven demand. The bureaucratisation of the state, a corporatist bargain with trades unions, and Bourguiba’s own increasingly authoritarian governance resulted in political and administrative bottlenecks. His successor, President Ben Ali (1987–2010) nominally pursued a neo-liberal economic strategy with a series of structural adjustment programmes, but public transport remained the province of the heavily-regulated, cash-strapped and unionised public sector.

Ben Ali’s family took control of large parts of the private car import and franchise markets, as well as controlling the banking system which sold car loans, so policy prioritised private vehicle ownership. Car ownership still remained the province of less than 10 per cent of the population (Oxford Business Group, 2017: 94), but there was little incentive for the government, which serviced the neo-liberal requirements of external lenders and the cronyist aspirations of the President’s family rather than any agendas for social justice or inclusive economic development, to direct investment into public transport. The two principal means of urban public transport, the yellow SNT<sup>3</sup> buses and the SMLT<sup>4</sup> light rail/tram Metro system, were combined in the parastatal company Transtu<sup>5</sup> in 2003, remaining tightly regulated and crippled by financial deficits. Four private bus companies<sup>6</sup> were allowed entry to the market in 1989, with their buses offering a greater degree of comfort at a higher price. But they still comprise less than 10 per cent of the network (CMI, 2017) and there is little coordination with Transtu. The overall insufficiency of bus vehicles and the weak administrative structures mean there is a generalised absence of timetables and they are unreliable when they do exist (Kilian-Yasin et al, 2016: 143). Only the road freight transport sector was significantly deregulated, with heavy duty traffic evolving rapidly and adding to increasingly intense congestion. Carriageways were degraded as public infrastructure funds were directed towards prestige projects like new airports and ports. Decaying surfaces and congested suburban corridors have since combined to create exceptionally dangerous driving conditions.

Tunisia’s national rail company SNCFT<sup>7</sup> meanwhile provides local rail services connecting the east of the city to the wealthier suburbs in La Marsa. In 2007 the government established the RFR<sup>8</sup>, a state-owned enterprise tasked with constructing a new rapid rail system linking the centre more effectively with the suburbs. Under the burden of poor administrative coordination and governance, progress was virtually

non-existent. Thus, in the absence of sufficient bus and light rail/tram transport, Tunis residents have become heavily dependent on the different taxi services available. Private ‘yellow’ taxis are metered, although government-set rates are low and many drivers indulge in the transgressions associated with informal transport systems (Agbiboa, 2018). Cheaper collective minibus taxis (CTs) (which have between 6 and 9 seats including the driver, but which frequently travel with 13–16 passengers) wait at stations until most or all seats are filled and drive specified routes. Taxi drivers are both heavily regulated and unionised. A political trade-off between the Government, the National Union of Individual Taxi Drivers and the National Chamber of Taxi Drivers sees government regulation restricting incomes (through fare-setting), while protecting the taxi market through limits on licenses issued. The two unions wield significant leverage, inhibiting new competition in the market and limiting innovation. For example, ride-hailing services such as the BOLT, Etaxi, Kapyt and Yassir taxis are unopposed. These services offer mobile phone apps connecting passengers with proximate private taxis, privileging them for an enhanced fare. Taxi drivers registered with ride-hailing apps can increase their earnings by charging more than the government-set fares so unionised drivers see little threat from them. However, a new motorcycle taxi start-up, Intigo, which surfaced in 2019 and which charges prices 30 per cent lower than yellow taxis, generated calls from the UTTI for a taxi strike.

One notable feature of the Tunis transport-scape is the relative absence of unregulated and informal modes of transport comparable with the “rickshaws, tuk-tuks, jeepneys, minibuses and motorbikes [which] appear across Asia, Africa and South America” (O’Brian and Evans, 2017: 78). This shows that, despite Tunisia’s incorporation into the global neo-liberal governance project, the state has not relinquished its role in system regulation nor withdrawn from partnerships with worker unions. Neo-liberalism is more of a narrative tool than a policy driver, sustaining access to crucial external stabilisation funding and legitimising the retrenchment of public sector provision whilst key domestic political alliances with unions are maintained. Informal entrepreneurship which might supplement otherwise inadequate transport provision is inhibited and potential new entrants to the market confronted with both bureaucratic overload and powerful opposition from protected interests. A further distinctive feature is the relative absence of bicycles and motorcycles in Tunis. Ben Ali’s privileging of cars, the cultural perception of bicycles as a poor man’s (and specifically male) mode of transport, and the high rate of traffic accidents, have combined to push bicycles out of the system in a potent illustration of the intersection of structural and societal constraints, with women at a distinct disadvantage (Poussel, 2018).

This disadvantage was evident to the researchers in other ways. For example, little is known about women as transport employees or users. The limited research available draws on large scale studies of the MENA region by international organisations to confirm gendered mobility patterns, problematic aspects of access for women, associated socio-economic impacts and the over-riding concerns about women’s personal safety (World Bank, 2012; Delatte et al. 2018). There is some evidence of low rates of female employment in the Tunisian transport sector and of their low-status roles when they are employed - the ILO reports that women filled less than 10% of transport roles in 2019 (ILO, 2019). High profile roles in the airline industry contrast with a real scarcity of women in executive positions as well as public transport driving roles (ILO, 2019; Alvi, 2014). We could find no systematic data for female employment in taxi, bus and tram services, but estimates provided to us suggested that while women proliferate in low-skill, low-pay ticket collecting and administrative roles, they comprise only around 30 out of 18,000 taxi drivers, and very few bus or tram drivers. We also found a scarcity of women members in the transport unions and, while there are no formal restrictions on women’s participation or office-holding in unions, those we met said they rarely stand for elected positions, face significant informal barriers, and do not consider the unions to promote their interests.

<sup>3</sup> Société Nationale des Transport.

<sup>4</sup> Société du Métro Léger de Tunis.

<sup>5</sup> Société des Transports de Tunis.

<sup>6</sup> TUS, TCV, TUT and STC.

<sup>7</sup> Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Tunisiens.

<sup>8</sup> Société du Réseau Ferroviaire Rapide de Tunis.

A final note should be added regarding recent post-Uprising developments in the sector which importantly indicates the on-going inadequacies of its governance. In 2016 the Ministry of Transport launched a five-year development plan to attract new investors to the sector, and although little of the anticipated 17 billion TDN of investment was targeted specifically at the capital, the plan endorsed promises for a Greater Tunis Authority for Urban Mobility as well as the creation of a sustainable transport financing fund to be supported through a National Urban Mobility Policy and Investment Programme. The development plan has suffered from the weak budgetary position of the country and although international organisations such as the World Bank and development agencies such as the GIZ and AFD have stepped up with some project financing, it suffers from the on-going complex and muddled governance of national and city transport which includes multiple administrative bodies, unclear lines of decision-making and bureaucratic bottlenecks (Oxford Business Group, 2017). The 2018 Local Government Code, which aimed to overcome blockages by empowering local authorities, only added to these problems, confusing the demarcation of responsibilities in maintaining transport infrastructure and service provision across the municipalities of Grand Tunis.

## 6. How women experience the Tunis transport system

The fieldwork recorded how women *experience* this transport system and the *tactics* they deploy in navigating it. The women interviewed spent large amounts of their day travelling, for education, work, leisure, and because they were frequently the family carers, escorting children to school, older relatives to appointments, or as they tried to fit family shopping into their commute. The cultural roles assigned to them as women, combined with their socio-economically disadvantaged status, and their (disproportionate) reliance on a public transport system characterised by crumbling infrastructure, inadequate coverage, discomfort and lack of safety, amount to precisely the transport poverty identified by Lucas et al.

Their accounts were marked overwhelmingly by perceptions of physical insecurity. Like men, women endure the insecurity which comes from poor driving standards and road infrastructure. Few interviewees owned or had access to a household car<sup>9</sup> either because of the prohibitive cost or because male household members dominated access to the household vehicle. Mostly reliant on public transport, the women interviewed noted that taxi and CT drivers are poorly trained and unconcerned with safety, talking or texting on their phones while driving, speeding, crossing rail tracks when the barriers are down, and jostling each other out of designated lanes. Drivers of both taxis and CTs frequently cut the seat belts out of vehicles (something observed consistently by the researchers themselves) so that more people can be squeezed in, and many cars and buses are in a dilapidated state, exhibiting previous accident damage and make-do repairs. The poor state of road infrastructure, especially in Site A, creates no-go neighbourhoods for vehicles, forcing women to walk through unsafe areas. In one meeting held in Site A, two researchers indicated that they had only come because they were able to travel together; as one said: 'If I had to come alone, I wouldn't have come' (B5).

Interviewees noted the absence of pavements, the density of parked cars, potholes and puddles, difficulties with strollers, paucity of pedestrian crossings and lack of street-lighting particularly around some of the larger Metro and CT stations. But women feel they often have no choice but to travel in risky places:

'I am unemployed. If that means I go to places that are unsafe, I have to' (B6).

They also noted how much better and safer road transport was in wealthier neighbourhoods, an acknowledgement of their relative

disadvantage:

*'In wealthier areas more people have cars, fewer use the buses, so they are in better condition. Roads are better, wider. In areas where the ministers live, the roads are wider there so there is less congestion, and you go faster' (A3).*

Public transport, like unlit areas, is a favourite site for petty criminals, with mugging, theft and assault being everyday occurrences. There were accounts of entire buses being held at knifepoint while young men stripped passengers of their valuables. Most interviewees had experienced petty theft on more than one occasion. The perpetrators are perceived to be mostly male, and other (male) passengers are perceived as complicit in their failure to protect women.

*'I was downtown when this guy came up and snatched at my necklace but didn't get it. No one did anything. He kept harassing me for thirty minutes to give him the necklace (which eventually fell into his hand) and there were men standing there who did not intervene.' (B6)*

The overwhelming majority of incidents according to interviewees took place on board public transport vehicles, again most frequently in lower-income neighbourhoods.

*'I've been taking the yellow bus for nearly 15 years. The type of violence that happens differs from one neighbourhood to another. For example, I live in the northern [middle class] suburbs. There are fewer issues there than downtown (Female, womens' organisation employee).*

Women in Site B who were often employed as casual labour on local farms faced particular safety issues. They are collected by local farmers and travel in the back of pick-up trucks to the farms, enduring a combination of poor driving standards, unsafe vehicles, dilapidated road infrastructures and dismal discomfort.

*'Everyday, a pick-up truck comes to pick me and 7 other women. We get in the back of the truck, dealing with the early morning cold. We don't get paid enough. We spend fifteen minutes on the road. I'm worried the whole way. And sometimes it rains on us... One time, oil spilled on the road. The truck started slipping and we thought we were going to die'. (B4, 10)*

More specific still to women is the experience of being sexually harassed on public transport or while walking in public spaces, which is so common as to have become normalised. In fact women are doubly victimised – not only are they subjected to unwanted touching and assaults, but they are often accused of having incited the crime in a culture where women are considered to be the embodiment of honour. Not only do male perpetrators confer guilt and shame upon their victims, but frequently so too do other female passengers.

*'I was on the metro. A young girl got harassed. She hit the man and complained loudly. All the women around her blamed her, said "you should be quiet, not dress like that". They were older women'. (A3)*

The interviewees regularly spoke of men taking advantage of overcrowded conditions to touch women, exposing themselves publicly, and even masturbating on women. Our data affirmed the results of a study conducted by a Tunisian research centre (CREDIF, 2016) which 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.

Even when not directly threatened, the excess of demand over supply for public transport fosters a competitive and aggressive environment in which women feel disadvantaged.

*'If there is a group waiting for a collective taxi, women and men together, men will push to take it. Men elbow women on the taxis and buses. Every time men push to get seats even if women are pregnant or disabled'. (B6)*

Interviewees remarked repeatedly on how scary it was to travel around the city, especially after dark and in areas frequented by drunks and drug addicts or when there were fights on the buses. The feelings of

<sup>9</sup> CODATU reported in 2017 that only 4.5% of Tunisian women owned cars, as opposed to 22% of men.

insecurity are compounded by the unpredictability and discomfort of public transport.

*'The bus gets really crowded, sometimes the doors don't close and when it rains, it leaks.... People open their umbrellas on the bus. (A2, 5)*

Journeys are frequently made up of multiple shorter trips, often with large deviations caused by insufficient direct travel possibilities and long waits between connections.

*'When I worked I was downtown...I spent three hours for the return journey... Lots of problems daily. The bus being late, breaking down, often directed to the national guard station because there are fights on the bus. And the train sometimes stops working when it is raining. I see a lot of reasons women are unemployed in this region. It is transport'. (B4)*

The lack of safety associated with public transport leads many women to pay the higher prices charged by private taxis and CTs rather than buses and trams. But it is not only this safety premium that makes women perceive public transport to be more expensive for them. Interviewees referred to the frequency of fare-dodging amongst men, the macho jumping over of barriers at stations or direct refusal to pay, all physically and culturally less problematic for men. The social stigma associated with getting caught, arrested or punished for non-payment is also higher for women.

*'When women get on the bus, they pay the ticket, in case there is a check. Men don't even bother to buy a ticket. If there is a controller on the bus, they will fight. On the internet they say that 40% of people don't pay on the bus –it is largely men. Women's job search is more limited than men because men don't pay to travel'. (B5)*

## 7. Tactics for navigating mobility

The interviews showed how women respond to these constraints through the behaviours which they deploy. For them, every journey is a complicated cost-benefit exercise calculated in terms of time, money and safety.

*'All women have a strategy or an action plan about how to travel to work. I'm used to it. I've become an expert' (Female, women's organisation employee).*

As travel is rarely direct because of insufficiency of bus and CT routes, most journeys are planned as a set of mini-trips, combining modes of transport and circuitous routing to avoid unsafe areas:

*'What's more accessible determines choice. CTs cost twice as much as buses but are quicker and much more accessible. Some people only have a low budget though, and generally a bus is a last resort. I choose the safest transport' (A3).*

Those with the lowest incomes like students and seasonal farm workers are forced to use buses and trams, the least safe modes, amplifying their inequality and vulnerability. They avoid neighbourhoods or transport stations which are known to be unsafe by taking time-consuming detours, particularly in the evenings and after dark. Indeed, seasonality and time of day are important considerations. Buses and taxis are often poorly ventilated in summer, or let in the wind and rain in winter, and walking in the dark is unsafe, so calculations are adjusted accordingly.

For some interviewees, winter travel for work or leisure was simply unviable. For others,

safety was found in numbers, planning a journey requiring coordination with a companion. Interviewees referred to efforts at carpooling, travelling with female co-workers, and co-ordinating to share the costs of expensive door-to-door taxis. For many there is a culturally imposed requirement that they be chaperoned in transit, reproducing dependencies on male relatives. Interviewees spoke of having to call

fathers, brothers or male friends to come and collect them in their cars, and of male relatives' decision-making over their mobility.

A further consideration is what to wear. Peer researchers distinguished between normal and 'transport' wardrobes but disagreed on the extent to which dressing more conservatively when using public transport actually made a difference. (B6) reported that *'I plan what I am going to wear the night before if I am anticipating using public transport. I prepare clothes that are a bit more conservative, less likely to draw attention' and (A3) that 'I try to dress conservatively, especially in conservative or rough areas'*. Interviewees had occasionally resorted to wearing the hijab, hijab Charii (dark and baggy robe) or a djilab (traditional dress) in an effort to deter harassment, but generally agreed that this made little difference, either because *'Even women in niqab get harassed' (A2)* or because *'People don't trust niqab women because it is very linked to terrorism' (A3)*. Despite the peer researchers and interviewees making frequent reference to their own considerations about how to dress when travelling in order to minimise possibilities for harassment, it was also the case that ultimately, they felt this made little overall difference. As one peer researcher said:

*'My clothes have little impact on my experience, because in Tunisia it doesn't matter if you're covered or not, you're not safe' (B5).*

Women also dress to deter petty crime, removing jewellery, carrying cheap mobile phones for show while hiding their real ones, and using cheap bags to store their valuables. They often sought invisibility for themselves, one commenting: *'I wear big glasses to cover my face and pretend I can't see them' (A2)*.

While most interviewees were very aware of, and resented, the conditions they face, they generally do little about it. Despite the passage of Law 58 in July 2017 which aims at protecting women against violence, few women we talked to either knew how to report harassment, or had any belief that it would result in some kind of justice. Others stated that the Green Line telephone service for reporting abuse is often unstaffed (and this was indeed the case when our own researchers tried calling it) and said complaints to the police are not taken seriously or followed up.

A number of campaigns encouraging women to report harassment (including the CREDIF/Transtu/UN led 'Ma Yerkebch' or 'Harassers don't travel with us' campaign in 2017 and a 2021 campaign by the Tunisian Association of Women Democrats (ATFD) have raised awareness but not resulted in tangible government or transport sector action to protect women. Such organisations are anyway considered to be elite organisations, dominated by women from wealthier Tunisian suburbs, far from the everyday lives of our interviewees. For them, any mobilisation is infrequent and localised, precisely because of the impediments to their active participation in the public sphere being described here. In the end, most women just keep quiet. Only occasionally did women indicate that they had fought back but for the most part the risk was accommodated within the strategizing process and thus became normalised.

*'It hasn't been like this for just one or two years. It has been our whole lives. It is normal. We get accustomed to it'. (A3)*

Thus, depending on their socio-economic identities and the neighbourhoods in which they operate, women are more likely to adopt behaviours which mitigate rather than overtly resist the structural, systemic and socio-cultural impositions which restrict their mobility. Indeed, the impositions upon them, the associated time poverty, and often sheer exhaustion, leave them little option. Travelling even short distances can take hours, so women leave the house and return late at night, only to confront their household chores when they return, leaving them with no time or energy for leisure.

*'Yesterday I woke up at 5.30am. I got dressed and had breakfast. I packed my lunch and left my house at 6.55. I ran to the station to I wouldn't miss the bus..... The bus arrived at 7.15. Everyone, me included, started*

*pushing to try and get a seat. I was unsuccessful...I arrived at XXXXXXXX at 8.10. I took the tram to YYYYYYY and changed the line there. I got to work at 8.40. My supervisor told me I was late and that if I am late another time, I will get fired. At 6 pm I finished work and went to take the 6 o'clock tram knowing that I would miss it. I did miss it, so I waited for 6.30 tram. I got off in YYYYYYYY and walked to XXXXXXXX. I got there at 7 pm and waited for the 7.10 bus....I managed to get a seat, the traffic was getting better so I got to [site A] at 8.35. I walked home but it was pretty dark. As soon as I got home, I changed, had dinner and slept directly because I was very tired. This is my life'. (A1, 4).*

Perhaps most worryingly, our data suggested that since their mobility was so disincentivised, some women would withdraw from activities and spaces entirely. For example, although students are entitled to school bus passes which reduce the costs of travel, we were told repeated stories of missed lessons and examinations and students dropping out of school after bad travel experiences. Interviewees also cited the unpredictability of public transport as a primary reason for having been unable to find, or hold, a job. Women living in poorly serviced neighbourhoods find employers unwilling to take them on, knowing they will be late to work or will have to leave early to avoid rush-hours or dangerous evening travel. Some interviewees had even resorted to lying on CVs about where they lived.

*'Transport and I never got along. The bus is always full, I'm always late for work, and ever since I started working in Tunis, I got fired because I'm always late for work. I was fired three times because of bus tardiness'. (A3, 2)*

Leisure activities are similarly constrained. If they could afford it, young interviewees were more likely to go out with (girl) friends to expensive entertainment districts like La Marsa or the Lac shopping mall, which have cameras and a police presence, and for which they would share private taxi costs, but others - especially married women and those with children - would limit their leisure travel to seeing family in the evenings and at weekends.

## 8. Conclusion

The data presented here suggests that Tunisian women encounter many of the same *frictions* in their everyday mobility as women elsewhere in Africa even to the extent that while mobility may be necessary, freedom can sometimes lie in staying at home (Møller-Jensen, 2021).

The women we met in this study were already socially disadvantaged, living in poor and underserved parts of the city, struggling to gain access to education, employment and decent livelihoods. Their lives were shaped by gendered social norms, more salient in their conservative neighbourhoods, which acted as a drag on their mobility. At the same time, as women they were assigned roles (shoppers, carers and escorts) that required them to be mobile and were forced into reliance on public transport to perform them. They were pushed into what they perceive to be increasingly unsafe public spaces while being responsabilised for the entrenched GBV behaviours which dominate those spaces. In so many ways their disadvantaged gender identities overlapped with and compounded their other social disadvantages in an exclusionary 'double-whammy'.

Whilst they deploy varying tactics to manage their mobility (strategising routes, mode of travel, budget and dress), the overall impact is restricted mobility both spatially and temporally. Resistance takes its toll: women who confront the daily perils of mobility, are themselves stigmatised when they fall foul of criminals, harassers or just the daily vicissitudes of the transport system. Their mobility is dis-incentivised with a consequential diminution of their contribution to local political economies (as well as an incidental reinforcement of normative drivers for male domination of public spaces). In other words, as suggested by Lucas et al (2016), it is not only their access to appropriate and affordable transport which is the 'problem' but the lack of access to all

the opportunities and possibilities of material, social, political and even physically-safe life which they are denied by the intersection of this transport disadvantage with their social disadvantage. They are indeed transport poor and increasingly excluded.

A properly functioning and gender-sensitive transport system might have offered them opportunities to escape some of their disadvantages, but the Tunis transport system compounds them. To access resources from international creditors just to maintain the existing degraded transport infrastructure, the government must adhere to a neo-liberal policy framework of constrained public expenditure and reliance on private investment. But prolonged political and economic crises simultaneously deter that private investment and empower vested interests (notably the unions) which themselves exclude women and women's interests, and which seek to restrict market innovation for their own purposes.

A final word on the increasing insecurity which characterises women's mobility. As the urban population grows the increasing competition for access to affordable mobility among citizens prompts forms of violence which most heavily impact those already on the socio-economic margins and against whom embedded cultural norms can also be deployed (women). In his critique of the rising social violence which results from heightened competition for diminishing public resources, Unwin has argued that "an exasperated populace may follow their 'scripted' roles and resort to violent means in their attempts to cope with festering poverty and mounting inequality wrought by their state's deepening neoliberalism" (2003, in Springer, 2016: 92). Perhaps this accounts for the increasing violence (including GBV) encountered by women in transit in Tunis. It is also possible that, by internalising the conviction that the insecurities encountered are unopposable and inevitable, or through their progressive withdrawal from the overcrowded transport marketplace, women can be understood as performing their own culturally-configured assigned roles as neo-liberal subjects in a patriarchally-structured environment (Chandler and Reid, 2016: 4). Women's agency is not entirely restricted to surrender in the face of ever-more violent competition. There are signs of rising on-line women's activism which challenges GBV on transport and in public spaces from a relatively safe space, and there are small, localised mobilisations such as the campaign by Tounissiet for redesign of a rail station in the Bardo district to remove a dangerous (for women) underpass. But these cannot come soon enough for our interviewees: as one woman said.

*'Transport in Tunisia makes people grow old before their time. It's very tiring and it's not always available. There's sexual harassment, mugging and stealing. I'm always worried about transportation. This country is a man's country'. (B2, 10)*

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Emma C. Murphy:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Gina Porter:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing. **Hamida Aouidet:** . **Claire Dungey:** Data curation. **Saerom Han:** Writing – review & editing. **Rania Houiji:** . **Mariam Jlassi:** . **Hanan Keskes:** . **Hichem Mansour:** . **Wiem Nasser:** . **Hanan Riahi:** . **Sihem Riahi:** . **Hamza Zaghoud:** .

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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