

ATHENA

RESEARCH PAPER SERIES

MSc Course

**"The EU as a Global Actor: Peace,
Security and Conflict"**

A neocolonial gender actor?

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Co-funded by
the European Union

ATHENA
- Jean Monnet Chair -



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This essay was originally written for the ATHENA Jean Monnet Chair MSc Course “The EU as a Global Actor: Peace, Security and Conflict” taught by Dr. Dimitris Bouris. It is published as part of our mission to showcase peer-leading papers written by students during their studies. This work can be used for background reading and research, but should not be cited as an expert source or used in place of scholarly articles/books.

Introduction

Article 2 from the Treaty of the European Union (EU) states that gender equality is a founding principle of the Union (European Union 2012). The United Nations Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) was groundbreaking for enshrining gender issues in international matters (Musina 2023: 465). Since then, gender equality has become a central issue in the EU's diplomatic relations with the Mediterranean, especially after the Arab uprisings (della Valle and Giusti 2021: 402). In fact, gender equality is core to Europe's claims as a 'normative power' (Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023: 407).

Nevertheless, the EU's approach to gender is often critiqued due to its neoliberal bias, which overshadows genuine feminist concerns (Guerrina and Wright 2016: 298). The EU regularly positions a 'civilized West' against the 'backward Arab world', overlooks the agency of non-Western women, and its gender policies fail to consider other countries' cultural and political specificities (Giusti 2017: 526-527; della Valle 2018: 9). Therefore, EU gender policies often rely on gendered and racialized inequalities and stereotypes rooted in Europe's colonial legacies (Hoijtink et al. 2023: 335-336).

Decentering perspectives aim to expose colonial tendencies in the EU's external relations (della Valle and Giusti 2021: 400). However, the decentering scholarship often fails to include a gender lens, even though gender is central in coloniality (Lugones 2010). According to Lugones, gender was constituted through colonization, which developed categories of racial differentiation that denied humanity *and* gender to the colonized (idem: 743, 748). Gendering the decentering paradigm is particularly important since gender power relations shape international politics and the daily lives of local women (Hoijtink et al. 2023: 339).

Situated in these debates, my research aims to apply a decentering approach to investigate the EU's gender equality agenda by focusing on the case of Tunisia by conducting a discourse analysis. From this, the research asks: "*How does a decentering perspective help shed light on the EU's gender approach toward Tunisia?*". Because the decentering approach is an emerging field in academia, this research paper intends to contribute to the discussion and explore Europe's contested role as a gendered actor. The paper first explores the decentering approach and presents the research methodology. Thereafter, the paper contextualizes gender equality in Tunisia and performs a discourse analysis of EU official gender-based documents; finally, the paper offers a conclusion.

Theoretical framework

Fisher-Onar and Nicolaidis (2013: 283) introduced a three-dimensional heuristic decentering approach to research Europe's international relations. Eurocentrism has persisted beyond the end of imperialism. Eurocentric analyses of EU foreign policy prevail, hindering the understanding of other world perspectives (Keukeleire and Lecoq 2018: 277-278). Also, colonial legacies continue to shape EU external policies (Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023: 408). Thus, a paradigm shift is imperative for

revitalizing European agency in an increasingly multipolar world (Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013: 283-285).

‘Normative power Europe’ assumes that Europe’s values are universal and should be spread to other contexts, implying the superiority of the West. Colonial narratives portray Europe as a ‘universal’ and rational actor against an ‘inferior’ and ‘backward’ non-European Other (Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023: 408-409). The process of EU norm diffusion is not unbiased, it is “rooted in an unequal distribution of power” where “third countries are just absorbing what the EU transmits without having the possibility of affecting the content of norms and policies” (Giusti 2017: 529). Thus, EU studies require a ‘decentering turn’ to reveal the colonial narratives that underpin Europe’s relations with its ‘neighborhood’ and how they permeate the EU’s approach to gender equality (Hoijsink et al. 2023: 340).

The decentering agenda has three analytical categories: *provincializing*, *engagement*, and *reconstruction*. *Provincializing* questions and decenters narratives that place Europe at the center of international relations and challenges the myth of Europe’s civilizational primacy and truth claims (Fisher-Onar and Nicolaïdis 2013: 286). Empirically, *provincializing* challenges the assumption that European experiences and narratives about history and politics are universal and homogenous (ibid.). Normatively, *provincializing* questions deep-rooted assumptions underpinning Eurocentric ‘civilizational’ claims and European foundations of sovereignty, security, democracy, secularism, and the Europe-Islam binary (idem: 286-287). The analysis will mostly focus on *provincializing*. Moreover, *engagement* requires learning and engaging with non-European perspectives of the world and value systems (idem: 286).

To materialize the decentering agenda, Keukeleire and Lecoq (2018) operationalized six conceptual categories: *spatial*, *temporal*, *normative*, *polity*, *linguistic*, and *disciplinary overlapping*. These categories are developed through the *provincializing* and *engaging* dimensions. Given the scope of the paper, the analysis will only draw on the *normative* and *polity* categories.

Normative decentering questions ‘EU universalism’, that is, the ‘universality’ of European norms and behavior (idem: 283). *Normative provincializing* raises awareness that norms entrenched in European and Western ideals about the liberal order are regularly prioritized in the EU’s foreign policy and exported to other contexts (ibid.). These norms primarily prioritize democracy, rule of law, human rights, good governance, and socio-cultural rights (Keukeleire and Lecoq 2018: 284; Giusti 2017: 528). Besides, *normative engagement* highlights the need to learn other societies’ norms, their interpretation and application, and how they relate to the European normative mindset (Keukeleire and Lecoq 2018: 284).

Moreover, *polity decentering* highlights the need to overcome European assumptions on how to organize society. *Polity provincializing* questions “predominant polities that reflect a Westphalian state-centric and modernity bias” (idem: 285-286). The state-centric bias focuses on territorial sovereign states and relations between them (ibid.). The modernity bias is “reflected in the Weberian conception

of the ‘modern’ state with its institutional and functional capacities and in the dominant western and European focus on individualism, citizenship and the distinctions between public/private, state/society and politics/religion” (idem: 286). These biases point to the state as the sole source of legitimate authority and provider of public goods and services (ibid.). Thus, *polity decentering* stresses the need to overcome biases that consider the ‘modern state’ as the main legitimate authority and to learn about non-European polities (ibid.).

Research design

To answer the research question, I conducted a discourse analysis using the *provincializing* dimension and the *polity* and *normative* categories. Discourse analysis is an interpretive approach that explores the “relationship between discourse and reality in a particular context” (Halperin and Heath 2020: 368). I analyzed two EU documents that incorporate WPS. The Gender Action Plan III (GAP III) because, while not particularly targeted towards Tunisia, it guides the European Commission and the European External Action Service’s external action on gender (Musina 2023: 467). And Tunisia’s Genre Profile, which contextualizes GAP III’s goals, and provides an inventory of gender equality between men and women in Tunisia and advice on how to use EU resources to ensure gender equality (DEUT 2021: 17).

To structure the analysis and code the documents deductively, I employed Guerrina et al.’s (2023) three feminist frames of EU external policies: *liberalism*, *intersectionality*, and *post-colonialism*. The authors identified three frames, which represent different interpretations of feminism in EU documents related to its ‘neighborhood’. *Liberalism* focuses on access to equal opportunities and considers the public sphere and legislation as imperative for women’s empowerment (idem: 495). The (neo)liberal frame reaffirms the EU’s position as a neoliberal feminist actor with an ‘add women and stir’ approach, unconcerned with challenging unequal power structures (idem: 493-494). *Liberalism* is often associated with the following themes: *equality*, *protection/support*, *victimhood*, *participation*, *empowerment*, *women’s rights*, and *EU as a norm leader* (idem: 495).

Moreover, *intersectionality* explores whether EU foreign policy recognizes that gender interacts with other structures of exclusion, which result in multiple and overlapping forms of oppression, producing multiple experiences of inequalities (ibid.). This theme is often associated with *diversity*, *social exclusion*, and *inclusion*, that is, the access of minority groups to power structures (ibid.). Lastly, *post-colonialism* challenges neocolonialism by questioning assumptions of the EU’s normative power and civilizational mission (ibid.). Its themes include *partnerships* for implementing the EU’s strategic objectives and *grassroots*, that is, women’s rights organizations and civil society.

Setting the context

This section offers an account of Tunisian women’s movements to understand non-European perspectives concerning women’s rights movements. The Arab uprisings offered Tunisian women new

political opportunities. From Tunisia's independence from France in 1956 until 2011, feminism was state-sponsored under the form of 'State Feminism' (Grami 2018: 47). This approach instrumentalized women's rights to expand the country's modernization process led by the authoritarian leaders Habib Bourghiba and Ben Ali (della Valle 2018: 3-4). Both presidents used women's rights to legitimize the authoritarian regime and human rights violations, lacking genuine concern for advancing women's societal position (della Valle 2018: 4; Muhanna 2015: 209).

Bourguiba issued the Penal Status Code in 1956, which banned polygamy and established the minimum age for marriage and mutual consent between the parties (Grami 2018: 25). The Code also gave women the right to work, start a business, open bank accounts, divorce and have custody over their children (ibid.). Nevertheless, the government persecuted women's groups that diverged from its discourse (Muhanna 2015: 207). Additionally, Bourguiba distanced Tunisia from its Arab-Islamist traditions to stimulate 'modernization' (idem: 208). Thus, the regime persecuted veiled women and, the headscarf became a symbol of freedom of expression, resistance against authoritarianism, and female agency (Yacoubi 2016: 259-260; Muhanna 2015: 221).

Women's rights became a contentious political issue after the uprisings due to the polarization between Liberal and Islamist feminists. The first free election after 2011 saw the rise of the Islamic Party Ennahda, which defended the close link between Islam and Tunisian (gender) identity (della Valle 2018: 4). Long-standing secular feminist groups struggled to reconcile political Islam with women's rights (Muhanna 2015: 214). Islamic women's groups do not uphold the individualistic and liberal tradition of secular feminists, who they accuse of imposing Western values on Tunisian women (Grami 2018: 36). Religious discourses resonate particularly with lower-middle-class women, while secular discourses resonate with affluent women (idem: 41). Additionally, many believe that Western-inspired advances in women's rights compromise Islamist identity, associating these with Ben Ali's authoritarianism (Grami 2018: 36; Yacoubi 2016: 256). The position of secular feminists denies agency to Islamist women, failing to recognize that women may prefer to bargain with the patriarchy rather than strive to achieve socio-political power (Muhanna 2015: 213-215). Hence, dialogue between both groups is essential as they both highlight the need for social justice (idem: 225-226) and ensuring "women's equal access to education, employment and political participation and struggle against violence against women" (idem: 227).

Moreover, tensions rose between groups supporting a patriarchal society model and those supporting an equality-based model (della Valle 2018: 5). To illustrate, feminists protested against and prevented the change in Art. 21 of the Constitution proposed by fundamentalist politicians, which envisioned the replacement of 'equality' between men and women with 'complementarity' (ibid.). Thus, equality between men and women became enshrined in the Constitution of 2014. Tunisian civil society also achieved gender parity in electoral law, the legal ban on violence against women, and the end of impunity for perpetrators (Moghadam 2018: 7).

Nevertheless, women, especially from marginalized areas, still experience violation of their rights, poverty, inequality in the labor market, and lack of access to education (idem: 12). The rural-urban divide remains steep and challenges in the private sphere prevail with 47% of Tunisian women aged 18 to 64 having experienced violence, mostly domestic (idem: 8, 16). Therefore, Tunisian feminists attach particular importance to fighting against violence against women and focus their advocacy on changing unequal power relations (idem: 7-11).

Analysis

The analysis displays the efforts to *provincialize* the EU's gender approach toward Tunisia according to the *polity* and *normative* categories. The analysis is divided into two parts following Guerrina et al.'s (2023) three themes: 1) *liberalism* and 2) *intersectionality* and *post-colonialism*. The main themes that emerged from the data were: 'equality and EU as a norm leader'; 'victimhood'; 'women's rights and empowerment'; 'diversity'; and 'grassroots'.

Liberalism

Equality and EU as a Norm Leader

The EU holds human and women's rights as foundational values and central components in its external relations (European Commission 2020: 1; DEUT 2021). The following statements establish the EU's normative approach to gender equality in its 'neighborhood':

“*Gender equality* is a core value of the EU and a *universally recognized human right*, (...) imperative to well-being, *economic growth, prosperity, good governance, peace and security*. All people, in all their diversity, should be free to live their chosen life, thrive socially and economically, participate and take a lead as equals” (European Commission 2020: 1)

“Follow an approach based on *human rights*, which places the principles of non-discrimination and *countering inequalities* at the center” (European Commission 2020: 3)

As previously mentioned, *normative provincializing* challenges the 'universality' of EU values, including human rights, democracy, and socio-cultural rights, often imposed on non-Western contexts (Keukeleire and Lecoq 2018). 'EU universalism' is particularly evident in these statements as the EU portrays gender equality as a universal human right, imperative for economic development and democracy, which are commonly associated with European standards (Giusti 2017: 534). The EU also assumes that a human rights-based approach is adequate for tackling inequalities in non-European countries.

Additionally, the EU mentions that “women and girls should participate equally in the *public and private sphere*, to achieve a functioning democracy and economy” (European Commission 2020: 15). Conflating democracy with women’s rights reinforces a Western neoliberal discourse that instrumentalizes women by asserting that advancing women’s rights increases democracy and, consequently, economic growth (Wolff 2022: 448-450). Thus, the EU reinforces its position as a ‘normative power’ whose liberal values and gender equality should be exported to non-Western countries without considering their cultural, religious, and sociopolitical specificities (della Valle and Giusti 2021: 401, 408; Musina 2023: 466). While the value of human rights and gender equality is indisputable, the fact that ‘EUniversalism’ results from Europe’s colonial past raises the need for questioning their ‘universality’ as a subtle form of neocolonialism and ‘Othering’ (della Valle 2018: 8; Musina 2023: 466; Wolff 2022: 438).

The EU highlights its concern for gender equality in Tunisia throughout the Genre Profile. The EU mentions that “Tunisian society is still very strongly based on a *patriarchal structure*, which marks the sexual division of labor between men and women” (DEUT 2021: 12). The EU stresses that this division reinforces women’s responsibility for reproductive labor, which overburdens them with unpaid care work and suggests changing mentalities and social norms as remedies for tackling the patriarchy (DEUT 2021: 12-13; European Commission 2020: 12-13). However, the EU fails to elaborate on what these remedies entail and how they incorporate Tunisia’s cultural specificities. In terms of *normative provincializing*, this excerpt identifies the patriarchy as the root-cause of gender inequality. This ‘legitimizes’ the EU’s ‘responsibility’ for intervening in Tunisia to ‘liberate women’ by imposing liberal values, such as gender equality and empowerment (Musina 2023: 479). This neocolonial logic portrays women in Muslim-majority countries as an agentless ‘Other’ and disregards their experiences and how they navigate patriarchal pressures (Musina 2023: 479; Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023: 418). Thus, this discourse reinforces Europe’s ‘White Man’s Burden’ by portraying Tunisia as vulnerable to patriarchal values and unable to fulfill its potential for advocating gender equality without Europe’s ‘guidance’ (Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023: 418).

Victimhood

The EU consistently uses a narrative of (economic) ‘victimhood’ to describe Tunisian women (della Valle 2018: 9; Wolff 2022: 450). Namely, the EU stresses the lack of entrepreneurship and representation in technological and start-up companies among Tunisian women (DEUT 2021: 81). Employment-wise, the EU mentions that women are “limited to public service and *informal work*” and are “*under-represented in businesses*” due to “difficulties in creating and developing their *businesses*” (idem: 65-66). Moreover, the Union highlights women’s lack of access to land titles and inheritance because “*according to Islamic law*, women have the right to inherit one share while men in the family are entitled to two shares of the family fortune” (idem: 96). In terms of *normative provincializing*, this discourse portrays Islam as belonging to an oppressive and patriarchal Muslim world, while liberal

feminism is associated with a tolerant West (Hafez 2022: 269). Consequently, this creates a strict binary between the ‘modern’ West and the ‘traditional’ ‘Other’, which underlies neocolonial projects.

Women’s Rights and Empowerment

The EU prioritizes women’s rights and empowerment in its gender agenda in Tunisia. To illustrate, the EU stresses that promoting citizens’ rights is at “the heart of [its] cooperation programs” (DEUT 2021: 22), as well as countering gender-based violence and inequality (ibid.). The EU applauds Tunisia for its leading framework for gender equality in North Africa since the Personal Status Code of 1956, which “pioneer[red]” women’s rights in the region (idem: 38). Nevertheless, it disregards the coercive context in which the Code was implemented. The EU also states that “since 2014, Tunisia has made significant progress in promoting human rights and gender equality”, but “despite the progress, the reforms (...) have a *taste of unfinished business*” (idem: 39).

As previously mentioned, *polity* refers to the form of organizing society, and *polity provincializing* calls for overcoming the assumption that society and gender equality should be organized along ‘modern’ European models (Keukeleire and Lecoq 2018). By highlighting that Tunisia’s efforts for gender equality are ‘unfinished business’, the EU constructs Tunisia as ‘flawed’ and in need of Europe’s assistance (Sachseder and Stachowitsch 2023: 413). This neocolonial logic positions the EU as the superior partner that provides expertise to Tunisia by exporting its liberal feminist norms. Consequently, the EU feels legitimized to export the ‘European experience’ to Tunisia, displaying asymmetry in their cooperation (della Valle 2018: 8).

Moreover, the EU’s discourse for promoting gender equality is based on ‘improving’ Tunisia’s gender equality approach through European models (Musina 2023: 464). The EU calls for “*improving* the participation of women in public and economic life” (DEUT 2021: 25); “*improving* (...) the transition of women to the *formal economy*” (idem: 130) and “*improving* women’s access (...) to *management and leadership roles in economic and social sectors and bodies*” (idem: 138). The EU also calls for “*improving* (...) access to *childcare services* to promote equal distribution of family care” (idem: 132). Moreover, the EU stresses the need for promoting “*start-up incubators*” (idem: 137) and “gender-sensitive solutions to *credit and loan barriers* that can *empower women entrepreneurs* (...), but also the promotion of *training*” (ibid.). In terms of *polity provincializing*, these statements suggest that Tunisia should follow the European model of ‘improvement’ to bolster women’s (economic) empowerment. This echoes a ‘modernity’ bias that assumes the state as the main provider of socioeconomic rights and social welfare, characteristic of European models (Musina 2023: 466). Also, the EU highlights entrepreneurship and empowerment as neoliberal instruments for increasing women’s competitiveness and position in the current gender hierarchy in the ‘neighborhood’ (Huelss 2019: 137-138). This further illustrates Europe’s instrumentalization of gender equality for economic growth.

Intersectionality and Post-colonialism

Diversity

The EU introduced intersectional concerns in GAP III and Tunisia's Genre Profile. Both documents reference the need to consider LGBTQI+ needs and acknowledge that gender inequality is intersectional and affects minority, racialized, migrant and queer women, as well as women with disabilities and from rural areas (Musina 2023: 468; DEUT 2021: 6, 69, 109). Additionally, Europe suggests an intersectional approach to tackle inequalities. These concerns are important for wielding transformative results for gender equality (Berlingozzi 2023: 458).

“Address *intersectionality* of gender with other forms of discrimination. Focus should on (...) *indigenous peoples* and persons belonging to *racial/ethnic/religious minorities* (...) *elderly women* (...) women with *disabilities* (...) advancing the rights of *LGBTIQ persons*” (European Commission 2020: 3).

While this discourse is a promising attempt by the EU to move beyond liberal feminism and embrace Black feminist theory, like intersectionality, it is embedded within a liberal frame (Musina 2023: 466-468; Guerrina et al. 2023: 491). To illustrate, the EU mentions that, for the development of the Genre Profile, the Union used “an intersectional approach *based on human rights*” (DEUT 2021: 6). Thus, in terms of *normative provincializing*, the EU's intersectional approach is subsumed to questions of human rights, rooted in Western values.

Grassroots

The EU highlights the need for engaging with civil society in its cooperation with neighboring countries, and ensure the “participation of *women's and girls' organizations* and *grassroots organizations*” (European Commission 2020: 6). The EU supports Tunisian civil society, including “feminist associations and human rights organizations” (DEUT 2021: 147). It also highlights that cooperation should be intersectional to “provide support programs for feminist associations, associations of women with disabilities, migrant women, racialized women, [and] LGBTQI+ people” (ibid.). However, an expectation-reality gap remains since the EU privileges women's organizations that follow a Western-liberal model of democracy and human rights in Tunisia (della Valle and Giusti 2021: 407-408). Thus, the EU neglects women's organizations that have a different “framework for rights, freedom and citizenship and, the role of religion within the state” (idem: 408).

In terms of *normative provincializing*, the EU's distrust towards women's associations that do not fully align with its liberal values, such as Islamist women's groups, imposes liberal feminist discourses in non-Western contexts. Thus, the EU reinforces the Europe-Islam binary and fails to engage with non-Western forms of feminism and foster dialogue between secular and Islamist feminists

in Tunisia. This normative bias is particularly damaging given the long history of exclusion of Islamist women's groups. The lack of cooperation with Islamist women's groups also reinforces neocolonial stereotypes of non-Western women as 'passive' (della Valle 2018: 2, 8). Moreover, in terms of *polity provincializing*, the EU imposes a Western model of 'modernity' that constructs the religious and secular spheres as separate (Hafez 2022: 271). Secularism fuels an inflexible view of Islamist feminists as "religious subjects primarily devoted to a spiritual, internal faith" (Hafez 2022: 271). As a result, secularism results in the 'Othering' of Islamist women, promoting a narrative of difference between the 'rational' Europe and the 'religious' Other (Huelss 2019: 153). Overall, the EU fails to overcome the assumption of being a civilizational power.

Conclusion

To conclude, the decentering agenda, based on polity and normative provincializing, helps to make sense of the EU's gender approach toward Tunisia by highlighting its neocolonial undertones. The decentering perspective unveils the overlap between normative and polity biases. The EU's gender agenda encourages Western models of female empowerment in Tunisia, fueling the universalization of Europe's normative experience. Additionally, the decentering approach calls for challenging the assumption that Western approaches to gender equality are synonymous with 'success'. The widespread assumption of 'EUniversality' suggests that the EU's cooperation with Tunisia manifests and reinforces neocolonial undertones, hindering Tunisian women's agency.

Moreover, the decentering perspective disputes Europe's intersectional approach in its cooperation with Tunisia due to its strong liberal bias. Additionally, the EU continues to privilege liberal women's organizations, reinforcing polity and normative bias. Normatively, this attitude reinforces 'EUniversalism' and Western forms of feminism. As for polity bias, the disregard for Islamist feminists fuels a neocolonial narrative that 'Others' Tunisian women.

Overall, this paper stresses the importance of including a gendered dimension in the decentering turn of European studies and questions the EU's capacity to be a legitimate gender actor. Nevertheless, it also has limitations due to my positionality as a European woman. While I did a reflexive exercise throughout the analysis, my bias may have blinded me to some aspects of the EU's gender policy in Tunisia. To sum up, the research findings stress the importance of questioning the EU's cooperation programs, especially as these have key implications for women and portrayals of their agency.

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