



Arab Reform Initiative

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# Facing up to Racism in Tunisia: Interview with Khawla Ksiksi

→ [Khawla Ksiksi](#)





## Arab Reform Initiative

On 23 October 2018, the Tunisian *Assemblée des Représentants du Peuple* (Tunisian Parliament) adopted a law to outlaw all forms of racial discrimination.<sup>1</sup> The text defines the notion of discrimination,<sup>2</sup> for the first time in the Tunisian legal model. It also commits the State “to promoting the culture of human rights, equality, tolerance and the acceptance of ‘the other’ among the various components of society” and to establish “integrated programmes to raise awareness, and education against all forms of racial discrimination in all bodies and institutions, public and private, and to control its implementation.”

The law established penal sanctions (from one month to a year in prison) and fines (from 500 to 1000 Tunisian Dinars – approx. USD176 to 352) against “whoever commits an act or makes remarks of a racially discriminating nature with the intent of contempt or to offend dignity”. These sanctions, doubled in some cases (when speech or acts are committed against a child, a disabled person, a person under the legal responsibility or authority of, etc.), are left to the decisions of the judiciary and are supplemented by a second battery including specific sanctions for:

- inciting hatred, violence, segregation, separation, exclusion or threat to any person or group of people based on racial discrimination.
- the dissemination, by any means, of ideas based on racial discrimination, racial superiority or racial hatred.
- the praise of practices of racial discrimination by any means.
- education, membership or participation in a group or organisation that clearly and repeatedly supports racial discrimination.
- supporting or financing activities of associations or organizations of a racist nature.

The legislator now openly treats these acts as crimes with even heavier sanctions (three years’ imprisonment and fines of 1,000-3,000 dinar – approx. USD352-1057). Finally, legal entities are also included by means of specific provisions and sanctions.

The law against racial discrimination is a landmark legal change. However, in a country still heavily characterized by racism rooted in behaviour and mentality,

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combatting racism and racial discrimination is still a significant challenge. In addition to its black population, Tunisia continues to host thousands of sub-Saharan students attending its universities while it is also a country of transit and of refuge for many migrants en route for Europe. All these people face racism daily due to the colour of their skin. Black women suffer twice on account of their colour and gender.

It was in this problematic context, that in January 2020, seven women activists, Tunisian researchers and university teachers set up the collective “Voice of Tunisian Black Women”. The Arab Reform Initiative interviewed Khawla Ksiksi, one of the founders; she spoke about the creation of the collective, its causes and its goals.

## The “Voice of Tunisian Black Women” collective

### 1. Who is Khawla Ksiksi?

I am a young Tunisian activist and a lawyer by training. I work at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Tunis, where I have had access to a rich source of feminist, antiracist, and leftist documentation. This is where I came across the work of Angela Davis. Starting from there, my knowledge about non-mixed movements and their impact on activism in general grew. The idea of deepening my understanding of this subject and of taking a stand in the fight against racism became a commitment. I, therefore, approached the subject with another activist (Maha Abdelhamid). We wanted to set up a collective to fight racial discrimination in Tunisia.

### 2. What is the collective?

The collective is an unmixed group of Tunisian black women which offers victims of racism and discrimination based on colour or gender a space in which to express their opinions and to testify to sexist and racist abuse without being attacked or judged, in complete freedom and approval. The collective has seven members, seven Tunisian black women, with different areas of expertise: Maha Abdelhamid is a doctoral researcher in sociology, Houda is a journalist, Fatma Ben



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Barka and Fathia Debech are university lecturers, Imen Ben Smail and Afifa Ltifi, who live abroad, are researchers and activists. The members come from different standpoints but the fight against racism unites us. The collective also aims to produce knowledge on this theme and to conduct effective and inclusive advocacy with institutions so that racism stops being a constant in Tunisian society.

### **3. Where did the idea of the collective come from? Were they inspired from elsewhere?**

When I came to the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, I took advantage of their library and spent a lot of time reading and examining the documentation. I started with the work of Angela Davis, then Maha gave me books written by “bell hooks”, the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins, the American feminist and activist.

The discussions on racism were very long, and it took time for seven of us to discuss and to reach an agreement. The dialogue continued but we decided to act on it when one of us, Maha, was attacked on the Facebook group “ENAZEDA” (#MeToo Tunisian), by other members of the Facebook group. She had shared a post to encourage black women who were victims of sexual harassment to talk about their experiences and to recount their racist encounters freely. It was then that Maha received a great many comments and hate messages saying that she was paranoid and that she was victimising herself. Very quickly, all of us who had defended Maha, including those who are part of the collective today, also received threats and insults. It was then that we decided to set up a conflict-free “safe space”.

### **4. What were the first steps towards creating the collective?**

We began with discussions and collecting ideas among ourselves, listening to the testimony of other black women who had suffered racial discrimination in society, and we read a lot of articles and books dealing with the subject, and on this basis, we set objectives and decided to create a collective to express our opinions and to begin our battle. As I said, we started with a long period of reflection with Maha, if only on subjects such as “being a Tunisian”; this is not recognized socially for black women and thus needs to be emphasized. Intersectionality has also been the subject of a key debate because I identify strongly with LGBT rights and I wish that all women and persons who identify themselves as women can have access to our platform.



## 5. How are the members of the collective organized?

We created a new Facebook group which allows us to express ourselves freely with an explanatory statement for all members and a commitment to avoid all racist, sexist, or offensive language. Members prefer to share their ideas in the Tunisian dialect in order to reach more people. For the time being, the collective is informal, we reject the legal status of an association. That would mean formalities which would not help our action much. We prefer to collaborate freely without any official engagement because we are not ready to receive funding from the EU or any other institution. To do everything legally, we called on feminist lawyers and solicitors to help us in our first steps on a voluntary basis. We also set ourselves up as a horizontal group. That means that we don't have a president or a spokesperson; we are all entitled to speak in the name of the collective.

## The Tunisian context

### 6. How do you assess the Tunisian context of racism?

Under Ben Ali's dictatorship, racism was a hidden taboo subject. Before the revolution, freedom of expression and freedom of the press were practically non-existent. Moreover, there was no transparency in the way the courts operated. We have only been able to speak openly about issues and to reveal our ideas since 2011.

For most Tunisians, black women are treated as a "sex machine". They are certainly not a symbol of beauty due to the colour of their skin. Moreover, under Bourguiba, and then Ben Ali, black people have always been marginalized, and have never held high-level official positions.

I first noticed the racism in Tunis, where I was treated like an object during my college years. In Tunisian dialect, we have this horrible saying "كاهلا تـسـافـي دمـ" ( *kahla tsaffi dem*, a black woman purifies the blood). All my life men I didn't know have come up to me asking for sex because they have a cold, the flu or some other chronic illness.

I have also seen discrimination in Medenine, the region where I was born. Here it is different: the blacks still live according to the system of social hierarchy inherited



from slavery. Social, economic and professional discrimination occurs at all levels. Finally, coming back to Tunis and starting to get involved in civil society, I noticed that the issue was hardly dealt with, if at all.

### **7. What distinguishes racism against Tunisian black men from racism against black Tunisian women? What is your relationship with the Tunisian feminist movement?**

Tunisian feminism has a supporting dynamic, but it is important to mention that even civil society in Tunisia is racist and does not give black women the chance to express themselves freely. Following this discrimination, the group *Falgatna* was set up as an example of a new wave of Tunisian feminism, one which could change this intersectional approach. It inspired a new generation of feminists who put racism back on the agenda. Besides, the current context is now much more inclusive of persons of colour than before. Yet today black women suffer a triple discrimination in Tunisia. First as economically and socially disadvantaged persons (in some social milieux), then as women and finally as black-skinned people.

### **8. Has the anti-racism law helped to change things?**

The adoption of the law was not easy. All sorts of aggression and even murders took place before it was passed. Yet it remains on paper; the reality on the ground is very different. Victims do not have the financial means to start costly legal proceedings, they cannot wait years to win a case, and in some instances, it is not socially realistic or acceptable to file complaints against neighbours or family members.

For things to really change, there needs to be a genuine on-going political commitment by the State with measures taken at the ministerial, governorate and municipal levels. A national strategy needs to be in place, as stipulated by the law, but this has not yet materialized.

I dream of one day seeing black children in schoolbooks, black quotas for public administration and businesses, of never seeing discrimination when becoming a judge or governor (due to the former policy rooted in the Bourguiba era of the “*blanchiment*” of public administration).



### The collective's activities

#### 9. How does the collective respond to these issues? Research, seminars, fieldwork?

At the moment, the collective is still in the diagnostic phase, identifying problems. Besides, it has to concentrate on the South more than on the capital city since it is in this region that we find the greatest number of victims. Then we have to raise awareness and encourage people to file complaints, if necessary. We also plan to have a website to publish analysis and research based on testimonials and to encourage the State to collect statistics.

#### 10. What was the reaction of the media, civil society, MPs, etc. to the initiative?

Since we launched the collective, we have had few institutional reactions, but individual reactions are more important. We have been encouraged by the collectives *Falगतna* and *Chaml*, whereas the established bodies did not really react to our initiative.

### The Arabic context

#### 11. Does the collective have contact with other Arab initiatives? What do you think of the Arab context in the fight against racism?

The collective is still in its preparatory phase and is not yet in contact with other Arab initiatives, but channels of communication and collaboration will likely emerge in the future. I should add that racism exists everywhere in the world but varies according to the context. I often repeat this argument when we discuss the denial of racism in Tunisia.

Today, these contexts vary a great deal across North Africa given the specific nature of each political context: democracy in Tunisia, a dictatorial monarchy in Morocco, military rule in Algeria and war in Libya. It is rare to find a similar pattern in countries which are similar geographically and socially. Like all social phenomena, racism is subject to the general context of the country in question. Racism in Tunisia is shrouded in total denial and black people are outsiders, excluded from decision-making positions. Paradoxically in Libya, there are many black ministers, senior administrators and black heads of industry, but also a



market for human trafficking of sub-Saharan Africans. It would be interesting to study the disparities between different types of racism. It is important to insist that racism really does exist. It is important for its subjective nature and variations to be studied.

We also need to reflect on the coincidence that in the same period human trafficking has been publicized in Libya, the debate on racial discrimination has opened up in Tunisia, and we have the murder of George Floyd in the United States. This has triggered a great deal of debate in Tunisia.



## Endnotes

1. Law n° 2018-50 of 23 October 2018, on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination can be consulted on the [following link](#) in Arabic and in French.
2. Article 2 of Law 2018-50: “Within the meaning of the present law, by racial discrimination we mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference operated on the grounds of race, colour, ancestry, national or ethnic origin or any other form of racial discrimination as per ratified international conventions, which may prevent, hinder or deprive a person of the enjoyment or exercise, on the basis of equality, rights and freedoms, or involving duties and additional charges. Any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference between Tunisians and foreigners does not constitute racial discrimination, provided that no nationality is targeted to the detriment of other nationalities, while taking into account the international commitments of the Tunisian Republic”.



## About the author



### **Khawla Ksiksi**

Khawla Ksiksi is co-founder of the collective “Voices of Tunisian Black Women”. She is a lawyer by training and head of programmes at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. She works mainly on environmental justice and natural resources and is heavily involved in the feminist, intersectional anti-racist struggle.

## About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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