SELECT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE LITERATURE REVIEWS

BARRIERS TO WOMEN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NORTH AFRICA

Prepared under Contract No.: GS-10F-0033M / 7200AA18M00016, Tasking N008

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MARCH 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported literature review is one of a series of 11 literature reviews contributing to Agency efforts to better understand gender-based violence (GBV) and its impact on the empowerment of girls and women. The literature reviews include peer-reviewed and gray literature on various issues related to GBV, synthesize evidence on contextual factors, and identify promising practices that address GBV around the globe. This literature review addresses the barriers to women’s political participation in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and the success of development and policy interventions designed to advance women’s political empowerment.

We define political participation as the activity of influencing government directly (through policymakers or implementing policies) or indirectly (via influencing people who can affect policies). Participation may take the form of voting, signing a petition, joining associations, participating in organizations, sitting on local councils, parliaments, or holding cabinet positions among other activities.

Focusing on Libya, in addition to Morocco and Tunisia, the review considers progress on women’s political participation, and offers recommendations based on research and evidence on various strategies and intervention outcomes. We address the following questions:

• How are violence and other impediments to women’s political participation different in Libya and North African countries, compared to other regions of the world?
• What, if any, variations exist within North Africa as opposed to the broader MENA region?
• What can we learn about overcoming these obstacles by comparing North Africa (focusing on Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia) with the experiences of similar countries, and from policy changes and development interventions seeking to increase women’s political participation?

This paper is based on a review of documentation from peer-reviewed academic literature, bilateral and international agency donor program reporting, and gray literature (e.g. reports, working papers, briefs, government documents, evaluations) from various organizations.

We find rigorous research and evaluations of women’s political work are limited globally, and such evaluations related to North Africa and the broader Middle East are even fewer. This literature review, therefore, relies on academic research, descriptive analysis and case studies found in the MENA region, emphasizing North Africa to include Libya, Morocco and Tunisia when possible.

KEY FINDINGS

• Despite advancements in reform regarding women’s political status in the MENA region following Arab Spring, women’s participation in public and political life remains limited vis-à-vis that of men.

The barriers to women’s political participation in the MENA region exist at the individual, household, community, and structural levels. Obstacles include, among others: conflict and instability, which are threats to women’s security in countries such as Libya; the COVID-19 global health pandemic; persistent inequities around women’s access to income, education, and health care; and enduring norms that uphold male supremacy in the political, social, and economic sphere. Family and community
pressures also present challenges for women’s political participation, as do features of the political institutions and organizations (e.g., political parties) that are key forums for participation.

- North African women are largely excluded from important political processes, such as constitution-building, political transitions, and peace negotiations. For example, in Libya, beleaguered by civil war since 2012, women are conspicuously absent from the country’s peace process, though they have played critical roles in politics and conflict resolution dynamics in the country historically. Women’s exclusion is attributed to normative and social structures that reinforce gendered roles, biases and stereotypes which discriminate against women.

- Attitudes in the MENA region towards women in politics and political participation are illustrative of this exclusion issue. Though most in the region say they are receptive to women playing a role in politics, particularly with regards to the right to hold political positions, public opinion in North Africa appears to nevertheless question women’s capacity to do so in Arab Barometer surveys from Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, and Libya (see Attitudes Towards Women in Politics below).

- The use of parliamentary quotas for women is a popular strategy used to bolster women’s political participation and representation in the MENA region. Libya, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria all have quotas that have contributed to the expansion of women’s participation in national legislatures, which have increased the number of women politicians as well as improved representation of women on the whole. Yet, gender gaps persist in these and other influential institutions, as well as in women’s voting, and political party affiliation.

- There is a paucity of evidence-based research examining the impact of interventions and approaches designed to address women’s political participation in the MENA region. The lack of rigorous evaluation (e.g. experimental and quasi-experimental impact evaluations that are able to attribute causality) and studies exploring the impact of interventions addressing women’s political participation, however, is a global issue and not limited to just the MENA region. More rigorous research and evaluation is needed in this area to comprehensively understand the link between changes in women’s political participation and various political, social and economic outcomes. For example: What are the impacts of training programs on women’s decisions to participate in politics and the quality of their performance? How do networks influence women politicians’ ability to initiate policy and their access to party resources?

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Instituting quotas for women in political institutions provides benefits for political participation of women in the MENA region.** Quotas enhance women’s symbolic and actual political representation and thus their political participation and may also contribute to legislation and services responsive to women’s interests. Quotas are also instrumental for women “getting their foot in the door” and proving their merit, resulting in more women winning elections. In addition, quotas may increase the self-efficacy of women who are actively political (Zetterberg 2009).

- **Although quotas create opportunities for women’s political participation, they are not sufficient and do not always translate into influence.** Capacity gaps and stigma may stymie women’s progress in national parliaments. Interventions should, therefore, include training to augment the political skills of women so they are effective leaders, advocates, and negotiators.
• In the same vein, build women’s capacity to identify sources of finance for campaigns. This is an area where there exists a significant gender gap. The deficit is probably larger for new women candidates than incumbents, though the latter category may still encounter hurdles.

• In developing a bench of political talent, training for women to develop and enhance campaigning skills is also vital. Other skill-building efforts might also focus on those that enhance women’s self-confidence in addition to increasing women’s knowledge around political rights.

• Increasing women’s political participation takes time, but could be accelerated by addressing discriminatory social norms and adopting measures for women beyond quotas, such as through “zipper lists,” OECD (2019) suggests. Zipper lists, which alternate names of women and men at the top of party lists during elections to make women more competitive with men, are considered among the most advantageous measures available to ensure that women are elected (Dougherty 2012). In Libya, 32 women were elected to the General National Congress in 2012 as a result of a zipper list (2012, p. 1). Policy makers’ awareness of these alternative measures is low, however (OECD 2019), and more awareness-raising and advocacy is needed.

• Men and boys must be included in interventions aimed at increasing women’s political participation through awareness-raising (Wright 2014). As mentioned, some men policy makers may place less value on women’s participation, yet men’s dominance of institutions necessitates their engagement in interventions that are designed for women. Interventions should address masculinities that contribute to stigmas, stereotypes, and discrimination against women. Engagement of men and boys should occur throughout all phases, from awareness raising, gender-sensitive training, to being mobilized as male champions. Relatedly, informal and traditional actors, such as tribal, religious, family and community leaders (who are often men) are considered the custodians of norms and tradition, and are important avenues for engagement around changing discriminatory norms. Involving families and communities is also key, as women face backlash and constraints from these groups in efforts to engage in political life. However, many argue the short-term timeframes usually adopted for these types of interventions are less effective than longer-term efforts; a program cycle of at least 3-4 years or longer is better for sustainable outcomes (NORAD 2015).

• Particularly in conflict-affected or transitional settings, expand women’s roles in key processes by considering reform of institutions that have the most significant influence on women’s political participation. In contexts like Libya, this includes women’s involvement in peace-processes and constitution-building, as well as peace and reconciliation mechanisms. Interventions should support advocacy for women’s inclusion in peace processes and national dialogue and for including women’s interests in proposed future institutions and legal frameworks. It is useful for women to mobilize early and quickly to capture the momentum of peace and constitution-building processes. Establishing links with other women’s networks and organizations is also important to coalesce around an agreed set of goals that should be achieved.

Looking to Libya, Libyan women facilitate many of the informal peace processes in their country and they play critical roles in mediating and negotiating disputes in their local communities and clans. Their formal involvement in the country’s national peace process, however, is critical, and may be enabled with more involvement from international organizations like the UN.
• **Information communication technologies (ICT) and social media platforms may expose Libyan – and all MENA – women to new political spaces and forums that are less costly, more informal and safer.** Research indicates that social media platforms are growing as a form of public participation. However, even here there is a gender divide in the MENA region, where internet penetration rates are higher for men (61%) than women (47%), according to International Telecommunications Union figures (ITU 2019). The gender gap for internet penetration rates is largest across the Arab countries of the MENA region, the ITU finds. Thus, efforts encouraging the use of social media platforms as forms of participation should ensure women first have access to the technologies. Here, men and boys’ engagement might be also beneficial for creating a more enabling environment for Libyan women’s access to ICT.

• **On the whole, more rigorous systematic evaluation and research exploring the impact of interventions on political participation of women in the MENA region (and elsewhere) is warranted.**

For example, more research is needed on the ability of women to develop informal intraparty networks and the impact of those networks on women’s ability to influence policy and benefit from mobility within the party. Research is also scarce on the relationship between informal networks and service provision (Benstead and Lust 2015). Work on networks characterized by tribe, ethnicity and religion may also yield more nuanced information.

It is assumed that increasing women’s representation – through quotas or other means – increases the likelihood women will focus on issues central to women’s interests such as access to health and education. However, there is little systematic research in this area in the MENA region. The healthy number of women parliamentarians (owed to quotas) provides an opportunity to expand the line of inquiry in these research areas.

Research and systematic evaluation that considers the influence of men and boys in intervention outcomes around women’s political participation would also be valuable. Surveys suggest women’s political behavior is shaped by men and family members. Engaging men and boys in awareness programs that enhance their knowledge around women’s rights and the value of women’s political participation is critical. For women candidates, male champions might provide support and mentorship.

Quality research about the impact of legislative innovations on changes to women’s political participation and empowerment is also lacking. The literature review notes that against the backdrop of legislation in North Africa protecting women’s rights to vote and participate in politics, there is little work on the influence and policy change on women’s participation. Moreover, there is a dearth of rigorous evidence on the relationship between women’s political participation and economic empowerment. More research would be valuable in this area, given the intuitive links between women’s economic empowerment and political advocacy and representation. Importantly, research would need to disentangle this “chicken-and-egg” relationship to explore whether greater economic participation encourages civic participation or whether civic participation encourages economic participation.

A two-page summary for this Literature Review can be found at: [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00XM4Q.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00XM4Q.pdf).
INTRODUCTION

The Arab Spring was remarkable in that diverse women across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region mobilized as leaders, demonstrators, and organizers, with the goal of fostering change that would lead to greater equality and civil liberties for all citizens, but particularly for women (Council on Foreign Relations 2017). Unprecedented activism in North Africa, for instance, saw reforms that elevated a host of long-standing issues ranging from the boundaries of state power to the expansion of social, political and economic opportunities for women and other marginalized groups. In Libya, 30 women occupied seats in the country’s parliament, and in Algeria, albeit where protests were more limited, post-Arab Spring elections brought a 31% share of that country’s parliament to women. In the aftermath of protests, women in neighboring Tunisia played an important role in the country’s constitution and transition process, while in Morocco, grassroots activism led to a myriad of legislation addressing the economic and political status of women. Moroccan women advocated for changes in the penal code (which occurred in 2014) and, for other legal gains, women’s advocacy led to raising the legal age of marriage to 18 and amendments allowing a woman to divorce her husband. In Tunisia, women secured 31 seats on the country’s constitution decision-making body through advocacy and mobilization. Women influenced constitutional debates as well as the text of the document.

Such reforms, however, have not translated into tangible and widespread results for women in the area of political participation. Indeed, women’s political engagement remains low in the region as gender inequities continue to shape the structure of opportunity for North Africa and Middle East women. In worn-torn Libya, the situation is especially sobering. Women played active roles in Libya’s 2011 revolution, from taking part in protests and marches to being active in social programs to help wounded fighters and search for those that were missing. Yet, the position of women in Libya did not improve significantly compared to that of its North African neighbors. Since the downfall of the Gaddafi regime in 2012, Libyan political participation for women remains elusive, as women remain underrepresented in the official institutions of the state. Of the 600 women that competed for state offices during the country’s first national elections, only two became part of the National Transition Council (NTC). National parliamentary elections in 2014 that followed the end of the NTC’s term did little to improve the political fortunes of Libyan women, amid a paucity of representation of women in governmental and other influential representative positions.

Given political participation of women in the MENA region remains limited despite some reform efforts, we are interested in the following questions:

- How are violence and other impediments to women’s political participation different in Libya and North African countries, compared to other regions of the world?
- What variations exist within North Africa?

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1 We define “political participation” as the activity of influencing government directly (through policymakers or implementing policies) or indirectly (via influencing people who can affect policies). Participation may take the form of voting, signing a petition, joining associations, participating in organizations, sitting on local councils, parliaments, or holding cabinet positions among other activities.

• What can we learn about overcoming these obstacles by comparing North Africa (focusing on Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia) with the experiences of similar countries, and from policy changes and development interventions seeking to increase women’s political participation?

To this end, the literature review describes the obstacles facing women in their effort to participate in politics, focusing on Libya and other North Africa countries with references to the broader MENA region. Considering the wide acknowledgement of the barriers that confront women, we also consider interventions and strategies designed to address the dearth of political participation among women in the region. Although the range of what can be called political participation is indeed wide, the literature emphasizes women’s participation in parliaments, which is considered one of the most important forms of women’s political participation. Although the evidence base on the impact of interventions on women’s political participation in general in North Africa is very limited, the review relies on documentation from peer-reviewed academic literature, bilateral and international donor program reporting, gray literature from think tanks and evaluations, and working papers.

The paper begins with an overview of women’s political participation in North Africa, as well as the broader Middle East region, addressing parliamentary participation, voting, political party involvement and affiliation, and women’s involvement in constitution-building and peace processes. This is followed by a discussion of the barriers facing women as they attempt to engage in public life. We then review the key interventions that try to address women’s political participation and conclude with recommendations for programming around women’s political participation.

OVERVIEW: WOMEN’S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Political participation may be a pathway to women’s empowerment more generally, and to political power more specifically. Empowerment refers to the “the capacity to influence policy, make demands, and call to account institutions that impact women’s lives, and includes political representation and collective action” (Dersnah 2012). Women’s access and mobilization in both formal and informal political spaces are key components of empowerment, as is the right to participate in political life and hold public positions in various arenas: head of government; national parliaments; local government, including mayoral positions; the judiciary; state boards; councils; and offices in the civil service (Dersnah, p. 2).

The inclusion of women in politics rests on the assertion that women’s political participation and engagement bring about positive outcomes that are multidimensional for women – and for countries as a whole. Markham (2012) asserts that the gender of legislators influences their policy priorities. Women’s political participation results in increased cooperation across multi-ethnic lines (Rosenthal 2001), sustainable peace (Chinkin 2003), enhanced responsiveness to citizens (Cammisa and Reingold 2004), as well as more favorable policies and approaches to healthcare and education (Markham 2012). Others argue that the involvement of women in politics even leads to decreases in corruption and strengthens the state and effective governance (UN Women 2020).
PARLIAMENTARY PARTICIPATION

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), women in the MENA region have among the lowest political participation rates in the world. For example, the region’s countries perform less well compared to the world average when it comes to the percentage of seats held by women in legislative bodies: in 2019 IPU figures, an average of 17% of seats are held by women in MENA countries, compared to 24.3% globally and 23.6% in the U.S. (CRS 2020 and IPU 2020). Though the varied polities in the MENA region – ranging from monarchies and authoritarian regimes to democracies in transition – may create some opportunities for women to participate in legislative bodies, those structures and processes may not, in practice, be very responsive to elected representatives, be they women or men. For example, the Saudi monarchy recognized women’s right to vote in 2011 and expanded women’s participation in the advisory, appointed Shura Council. Since 2017, Saudi Arabia has also recognized some additional women’s rights, such as the right to drive, but the government continues to maintain “guardianship” limits on women’s behavior.

Figure 1. Women’s Parliamentary Representation by Region

![Figure 1. Women’s Parliamentary Representation by Region](https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=10&year=2020)

Despite the acknowledged benefits of women’s political participation, as Figure 1 (above) shows, the Middle East and North Africa, in a regional comparison, lag behind Asia and Africa, and are well below Europe and the Americas.

A look at country-level figures, however, reveals a more nuanced picture (see Figure 2 below). In North Africa, women in conflict-affected Libya have lower levels of representation in the house of representatives than, for example, the lower houses of parliament in Algeria and Morocco or the

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assembly in Tunisia, where women enjoy greater participation, in part, likely due to quotas. For countries that also have upper houses, such as Algeria and Morocco, women comprise 6% and 11% of those chambers’ members, respectively. Outside of North Africa, the United Arab Emirates is an outlier for the Middle East region as a whole. There, women make up 50% of the parliament due to quotas, with 21 women occupying a seat in the body which is albeit small.

**Figure 2. Percent of Women in Parliament in the MENA and Gulf Regions**

![Bar graph showing the percentage of women in parliament in the MENA and Gulf regions.](source: IPU 2020)

Women’s participation in ministerial positions is also shown to be low in available 2018 IPU statistics. In Morocco, women held only three of 19 ministerial positions (15.8%), and in Algeria, women held five of 33 cabinet posts. Surprisingly, in Tunisia, considered the most progressive country in North Africa, just two women (6.9%) occupied one of Tunisia’s 29 posts (IPU 2019).

**VOTING**

Although voting is perhaps the most basic form of political participation, widespread voting is a challenge for women in the MENA region. Voting is not just about political participation. It is an opportunity for citizens to select leaders who will provide critical services, such as food, employment, housing loans, educational scholarships, or even water pumps and fences. Yet, women’s voting rates in the MENA region are consistently lower compared to that of men by varying degrees (Abdo-Katsipis 2016). Complete voting turnout data by gender is not available for the countries of focus, however, Arab Barometer results from 2018-2019 indicate a similar trend, with some differentiation.
When asked if they voted in the last parliamentary election held in their country during the relevant year, women in Libya, Tunisia and Algeria were slightly less likely to say they participated in their recent national election. The exception, however, is Morocco, where a larger percentage of women voted than men.

Abdo-Katsipis (2016) finds that while common socio-economic factors that influence voting among women in certain countries, such as Morocco, come into play (women with lower education and income levels are less likely to vote), it is familial control over women’s mobility that appears to be the more significant variable impacting women’s voting (2016, p. 52). The role of family suggests normative and cultural factors also shape women’s calculations around voting. Young Arab youth, she explains, live at home with their parents until they marry. After marriage, men become heads of household, while women move from being under parental to spousal authority (p. 53). In a 2010 survey on this issue, most Moroccan women (62%) reported they did not feel comfortable leaving home to vote without the permission of their parents or husbands. Women who were most likely to avoid voting for such reasons were young, less educated, had a lower income level, less access to property, and lacked access to key social services, like health care. In direct contrast, women more likely to vote under similar circumstances were better educated, had access to more material resources, and access to various services (p. 53).

Abdo-Katsipis (2016) posits that although one might expect political reforms in Morocco and other countries in the MENA region would encourage women to vote despite familial circumstances, they do not. This may be in part due to lack of policies specifically addressing the social and economic

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4 For example, women in Morocco and all North African countries have the right to vote and stand in elections. In Morocco in particular, changes in the 2011 constitution guarantee equality for women and men in civil, political,
vulnerabilities (e.g. access to education, employment, and health care) that disempower and demobilize women and thus influence their participation in elections.

**POLITICAL PARTY INVOLVEMENT AND AFFILIATION**

Consistent with their lower voting rates, women's participation in political parties is also minimal. Although party participation is low across the Middle East and North Africa generally, irrespective of gender, women tend to be less involved in parties than men. Focusing on North Africa, only about 7% of Libyan men and 3% of women say they belong to a political party, while similarly small percentages are engaged in parties in Tunisia (4% vs. 2%). Throughout the region, women's public participation often takes the form of membership of social charities (Bayat 2010), rather than in political parties or public office.

**WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN CONSTITUTION-BUILDING AND PEACE PROCESSES**

Participatory approaches in constitution-making processes have become more popular as such inclusion promotes engagement among diverse and marginalized groups, state legitimacy, and national ownership (UNDP 2018). Involvement of diverse groups, including women, is especially critical in divided societies. In Tunisia, often a model of inclusive constitution-making approaches in the MENA region, women from across the spectrum participated in the country’s constitution-making discussions, development of new principles, and substantive writing of content and text. According to a UNDP case study of constitution-building in Tunisia, women – successfully addressing and including in the constitution issues germane to women in Tunisian society – achieved significant accomplishments related to women’s representation on elected bodies, prohibiting violence against women, and advancing equal opportunities for both women and men in various domains (2018, pp. 1-2).

Engagement in peace processes, as a form of political participation, is no less relevant. Research suggests women’s participation in peace processes makes processes 64% less likely to fail, and 35% more likely to last at least 15 years (Burchfield 2019). Burchfield found the inclusion of women at the negotiating table may result in agreements that improve gender equality, which, in turn, decreases conflict between and within states, increases stability, and promotes post-conflict recovery. At least as affected by conflict as men, women are equal stakeholders in peace. Despite the evidence of women’s valuable contributions, their representation has only marginally improved. Worldwide since 1992, women have made up only 3% of mediators, 4% of signatories, and 13% of negotiators in peace processes (UN Women 2020).

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economic, social, cultural and environmental rights and freedoms. These reforms provide space for women's voting in Morocco, as do, amendments to personal status codes since 2004 which provide protections for women against male guardian requirements, rape-marriage, and sexual harassment. Algeria advanced similar changes to their personal status codes, while Tunisia relies on perhaps the MENA region’s most liberal set of codes, which have been in place since 1956.
IMPEDIMENTS TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

PERSISTENT NORMS OF PATRIARCHY

The barriers to women’s political participation in North Africa and elsewhere are many. Existing religious and cultural norms shaped by patriarchy, for instance, question women’s ability to lead and therefore deem women’s political participation as an inappropriate activity. Stereotypes linked to women’s roles as caregivers relegate women to household and child care tasks. In the MENA region, cultural and religious norms are enshrined in personal status codes which govern family and domestic relations. Personal status codes are not necessarily reflected in country constitutions, and can vary widely between countries. Based on Islamic law – and in some countries a combination of religious and secular sources – the codes stifle women’s participation. Some personal status codes limit women’s mobility, their ability to interact with strangers, and their ability to own property, while others limit women’s access to divorce and ability to pass on their children’s nationality. A long-standing law in Lebanon does not allow women to pass on their citizenship to children; if a Lebanese woman marries a non-Lebanese man, her children do not have Lebanese citizenship. In 2017, the Iraqi parliament presented a draft law that attempted to legalize marriage of girls as young as nine years old, permit marital rape, and allow for marriage to multiple wives. Although these do not bear directly on political participation, the codes marginalize women’s status within the family and community, thus placing constraints on their ability to participate substantively in public spaces with autonomy.

Importantly, such norms exist against the backdrop of women’s right to vote. Although MENA constitutions uphold women’s right to vote, this is no guarantee that women’s voices will be heard at the ballot box. In Egypt, observers note that in rural villages, husbands, fathers, or brothers may tell women how to vote – or even simply take a woman’s ballot from her and fill it out as they please. Even though women may rise above these constraints to participate in politics, they may nevertheless be met with fierce opposition from the religious establishment or ulama in their countries (Benstead 2015).

Abdo-Kitsipis’ (2016) analysis of women’s voting in Morocco, which was discussed earlier, underscores the role of family as a constraint on women’s mobility and thus her ability to vote independently. Women feel social pressure to stay at home due to the influence of family authority. Beyond the individual-level impacts, there are broader implications for collective action. “Female participation,” the author concludes, “is framed by mechanisms of familial control that limit female voters’ ability to consolidate and mobilize into a socio-economic bloc with interests that need to be addressed” (2016, p. 54).

At the international level, some countries in the MENA region have expressed criticism towards various components addressing women’s equality in the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Arguments are frequently based on the assertion that the conventions are inconsistent with Islamic law and religious prescriptions (Bteddini 2014). For example, countries including Libya, Algeria, and Morocco raised reservations over CEDAW, taking issue with prescriptions that require equality for women in family law (El-Masri, 2012).

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5 https://www.globalfundforwomen.org/political-empowerment-for-women-in-the-middle-east/. An earlier 2014 version of the bill also placed restrictions on women’s right to divorce, inheritance and child custody. The Iraqi parliament failed to pass the draft 2017 law following domestic and international outcry.
Others, such as Tunisia have argued that CEDAW clashes with national constitutions and national laws. Significantly, Tunisia and Morocco have removed reservations towards CEDAW.

INSTITUTIONAL / ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS

Other gender biases facing political women concern the organizational structure of political parties that conflicts with traditional gender roles (Sater 2007, 732). Local party meetings take place in the evening, often until late at night, when women are expected to be at home to fulfil family caretaking functions. “Public space is constructed as ‘male’ which poses significant problems to women’s participation in public affairs and politics. Public affairs is a domain reserved for men” (2007, p. 732).

Also relevant is the lack of access to basic organizational / institutional resources that enable political participation, particularly for women candidates, such as political party funding and resources, which are critical for fielding effective elections. Electoral campaigns are costly and require either autonomous financial means or the support of the family (Sater 2007). Very few women have their own financial means and have to rely on family support or, in the absence of this, face the possibility of incurring substantial debt. Party leadership may provide assistance, but this depends on the leadership’s strategy and trust in women (2007, p. 732). Even if financial aid is provided by party leadership, room for autonomous political action is limited, because of the indirect financial dependency that is bound to follow and potentially shape women’s decision-making (p. 732). Sater, in summarizing the dilemma, says:

Lack of autonomous funds means that women are not only politically dependent on men and neo-patrimonial practices within political parties, but also financially. Party leaders can and do ‘promote’ their own women to which they are linked by primordial ties, often family and ethnic links, and in turn, these women become dependent on their political ‘patron’. Such women can find it difficult to propose independent political views (2007, p. 732).

Familial ties and connections are thus potentially critical for financing women’s campaigns – as well as establishing initial links to political structures. Once female parliamentarians ascend to office, networks and relationships independent of familial ties become more important for political survival (Benstead and Lust 2015). As explained by Benstead and Lust, women parliamentarians lack access to homosocial capital – “those close trusting relationships with individuals, often of the same gender, who have similar access to resources needed for electoral and political success. Homosocial capital is both an expressive and instrumental resource” (2015, p. 5). Women lack access to this critical resource due to their inability to penetrate male-dominated networks, or their inability to create well-resourced women’s networks of their own. The lack of resources and networks prevent women parliamentarians from being fully responsive to constituents as they try to provide services, but it also influences perceptions of their male colleagues. Bjarnegard (2013) noted women parliamentarians are deemed less valuable sources of wasta (i.e., clout or influence), and as a result, male parliamentarians are inclined to see women as not as politically influential, mobilized, and lacking in instrumental resources. Male parliamentarians have more men with resources in their informal networks thus typically have more access to resources than their female counterparts with which to provide services to their constituents. Requests from constituents may cover a variety of areas ranging from medical treatment, jobs, and access to electricity to help with bureaucratic and judicial corruption. This lack of resources prevents women parliamentarians from being as responsive to constituents’ – and particularly women constituents’ – needs (Benstead and Lust 2015, p. 6). Garnering support of fellow women parliamentarians who lack resources ultimately becomes a lower order priority for political parties, as women’s votes are believed to be less important, and thus,
there is less effort to mobilize women’s support. These dynamics underscore the forces which tend to relegate women to less substantive roles within political parties.

Furthermore, for many women, lack of experience and knowledge and unfamiliarity with political rights and responsibilities are significant challenges. These may influence women’s confidence to participate in public fora and add to risk aversion, diminishing the level of competitiveness of women in politics vis-à-vis men (Dersnah 2012).

**ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN IN POLITICS**

An examination of attitudes towards women’s participation in politics is useful for understanding why barriers to women’s political participation may be so entrenched. According to a 2016 Arab Barometer survey, women tend to be less interested in politics (Robbins and Thomas 2018). For example, less than half of women respondents in all countries surveyed across the MENA region report being interested in politics. For data that is available, only about a tenth of women indicate interest in politics in Algeria (11%) or Morocco (9%), though nearly a third of women in Tunisia (28%) are likely to say they are interested or very interested in politics. A similar proportion in Palestine (28%) have the same sentiment, followed by 21% in Egypt, 19% in Jordan, and 16% in Lebanon. Women’s political interest lags behind that of men’s in all Arab Barometer survey countries: results reveal large differences in Lebanon (24 points), Palestine (19 points), and Morocco (18 points). Importantly, though, the difference in levels of interest between men and women is smallest in Tunisia at only eight points, which may be due to more liberal laws that have long governed the status of Tunisian women (2018, p. 7).

Trends suggest decreased interest in politics among women across the entire MENA region from 2006 to 2016, but this decline is also noted among men, and is therefore not gender-specific. In 2006, roughly a third of women across MENA were “somewhat” or “very interested” in politics, compared to 45% of men who expressed the same view, a pattern little changed in 2011 and 2013, during the initial years following the Arab Spring. Political interest appears to have declined on the whole, with just one in five women and a third of men in 2016 holding an interest in politics, a 10-point decline over just three years for both genders (Robbins and Thomas 2018, p. 9).

Interest in politics, however, appears unrelated to perspectives on women’s capacity for high leadership in some countries. Majorities in Morocco (70%) and Tunisia (63%) believe women have the right to serve as a leader (president or prime minister) of a Muslim country, though half as many (36%) in Algeria agree (Robbins and Thomas 2018, p. 9-11). Most, however, still believe men are superior leaders vis-à-vis women, though women are more likely to embrace high-ranking female leadership than are men. In terms of overall regional trends, Arab Barometer findings indicate little change in views in the MENA region over roughly the last decade. Views among women themselves have also remained fairly stable. Of note, however, is the number of men who believe it is permissible for a woman to occupy the highest political positions, which increased somewhat from around 50% in 2006 and 2011 to 55% in 2016.

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS**

Not surprisingly, education levels also pose limitations to women’s political participation in the MENA region. Education is important not just for individual well-being, but also societal development and economic productivity. The link between education and political participation rests with greater
awareness of political opportunity and the importance of participating in politics, be it running for office, engaging in peaceful activism or voting in elections at the community, regional, national or international levels of politics. Progress in the MENA region is noteworthy. Primary enrollment is high across most countries, and gaps in secondary-level education have closed significantly. Women in the region are more likely to enroll in university than in the past. In UNESCO data available for Algeria and Morocco, literacy rates for women 15 to 24 years-old, rose from roughly 20% in 1970 to around 60% and 85%, respectively, by 2000. Challenges, however, persist, amid concerns of low quality of education and access to education among girls. Liby stands out, with a literacy rate among women 15 years and older of 99% in 2004 (the most recent figure) that is on par with that of men (99%). But, the war has likely diminished those gains after nearly nine years of conflict; lack of security has derailed access to school for thousands of children (Abdo-Katsipis 2017).

Critically, education is linked to political interest and as well political knowledge. Studies suggest that women tend to know less about politics than other citizens (Abdo-Katsipis 2017; Claibourn and Sapiro 2000) in both democratic and non-democratic contexts. Ingelhart (1977) and others find that women’s propensity to participate politically is directly correlated with women’s educational achievement and also to their participation in the paid labor force (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012; Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1999). Worldwide, women are less likely to achieve higher education, secure employment in general, and when women do work, they are typically in lower-paying jobs (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer 2012; Mammen and Paxson 2000). This forms a structural barrier where women are less likely and able to participate in public and political life. As above, the consequence of this barrier is that the voices and needs of women are not fully heard (Inglehart and Norris 2003).

These variables which drive the political barriers worldwide also apply to the MENA region. Yet, the region presents a paradox: even as women’s primary and secondary educational attainment significantly improves (to the extent that rising rates appear to be on a path to closing the gender gap), women’s labor force participation rates and access to paid employment remain low (Assad et al 2018).

GAPS IN LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

According to the Arab Human Development Report (2009), most Arab states have laws that are discriminatory towards women as they relate to criminal sanctions, employment, and nationality of children born to foreign husbands, each of which underscores the numerous institutionalized hurdles women in the region confront (Bteddini 2009). Yet, women do have the right to vote as mandated by their countries’ constitutions. Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria are no exception. The paradox is that rights and laws do not necessarily guarantee women’s political participation and inclusion in decision-making.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women is a form of GBV. As such, it is a violation of human rights, civil and political rights, and threatens gender equality and country goals of building strong representative, responsive

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6 https://www.prb.org/empoweringwomendevelopingsocietyfemaleeducationinthemeastandnorthefrica.
7 http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/ly
democratic institutions. Women are exposed to various forms of violence participating in politics and public spaces. A recent IPU (2020) study found that 82% of women parliamentarians surveyed globally experienced some form of psychological violence from members of the public and fellow parliamentarians. Pilot studies in Tunisia and other countries (Honduras, Tanzania and Cote d’Ivoire) implemented by the National Democratic Institute (2017) similarly indicate that violence occurs within political parties, with 44% of respondents from surveyed parties indicating violence was more likely to be experienced by women and only 4% believing men were more likely to be targets of violence. In the same survey, 55% of women reported experiencing some form of violence, with 48% most often reporting psychological violence. Fewer reported experiencing economic (26%) or physical violence (20%), but 36% experienced threats or coercion (2017, pp. 6-7). The International Foundation for Elections Systems (IFES) found that women and men experience electoral violence differently, with women experiencing more than twice as much psychological abuse/violence than men in a cross-country study that reviewed 2,000 acts of election violence in six countries from 2004 to 2010 (Bardall and Meyers 2018).

While women members of parliament are the most visible targets of violence, local representatives, election staff, activists, and indirect victims (family members and friends) of women candidates and representatives may also be targets of gendered violence (OHCHR 2016). Importantly, violence may be perpetrated not only by men, but by sister party members and officials who aim to silence women who are seen as competitors (OHCHR 2016). Such threats may emanate from within the party or from other political parties. Women participating in politics in the MENA region and elsewhere also face violence not just from strangers, but from their own family members and communities.

CONFLICT AND INSTABILITY

Violence against women is exacerbated under conditions of conflict and instability. Indeed, women’s political participation is also determined by the extent of existing risks to their personal security (Bteddini 2009). This is particularly evident in contexts such as Libya, where the obstacles for women’s political participation are formidable and amplified by war and instability. In her study of Libya, Burchfield (2019) cites war-related insecurity that limits women’s mobility in public due to norms prohibiting women traveling without a male guardian. Importantly, in conflict settings patriarchal norms may be guided not only by masculinity but also militarism and fundamentalism. These are bolstered and reinforced by the violent conflict, giving power to political actors with interests that seek to exclude and subordinate women. Women who participate in politics in Libya face the risk of gender-based violence, as the conflict has led to a loss of gains in women’s empowerment. There are several vivid examples of the peril with which political women in Libya must live. Seham Serghewa, an activist and House of Representatives member was kidnapped in July 2019, while human rights activist Salwa Bughaighis and dissident activist Hanan al-Barassi were assassinated in 2014 and 2020, respectively. These are examples of a disturbing pattern of violence against women in Libya that involves assassinations and kidnappings and disappearances. However, the problem of gender-based violence extends to non-political Libyans as well as the broader population. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA 2020), of the 90,500 Libyans displaced, 51% are women and are at risk of GBV, as the growing security vacuums

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10 https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/how-the-exclusion-of-women-has-cost-libya/.
occupied now by Salafi jihadists leaves women, particularly the displaced, vulnerable to rape, trafficking, and prostitution. Armed groups resort to these activities as strategies of war (Estelle 2019; UN 2019).

Kishi (2017), in her work on violence against women in developing settings, notes that GBV of a more political nature occurs “when women are targeted by agents of the state (police, customary and local authorities, militia, etc.) to: create a high risk political space to oppress women; prevent their political participation; and to create an environment where the probability of violence is high for women, all done ostensibly with the aim of maintaining order”. In addition to this gendered repression, as Kishi calls it, this form of GBV can also include sexual violence.

For Kishi, political violence against women or gendered repression is a denial of specific forms of security for women within unstable settings, and it remains poorly documented. It prevents the effective participation of women within the political space, especially in efforts to sustain women’s rights and empowerment, and generally perpetuates an environment of instability with violent consequences. “While sexual violence strategies can be used as a terror tactic to cultivate an environment of fear, gendered repression is more systematic and widespread across a society and can include other targeting tactics to carry out political violence against women as well, in addition to sexual violence strategies” (Kishi 2017).

On the whole, a deep understanding of the forms of gender-based violence in political spaces is limited, and the Libyan context is an opportunity for new lines of inquiry. While many studies of political GBV have focused on the practices of groups during wars, the practices of gendered repression in unstable – but not warring – developing settings is under-acknowledged and ought to be scrutinized equally closely. As Kishi notes, “There has been significant research on GBV within developing countries, and investigations typically concern the pervasiveness and embeddedness of GBV within the social sphere (i.e. domestic circumstances and society) or crisis situations, including civil wars. To date, a comprehensive exploration of GBV as political violence outside of domestic circumstances, yet within the public political sphere, and outside of the specific context of wartime, is missing” (Kishi 2017).

Kishi carefully points out that widespread and persistent political violence that does not necessarily escalate into large-scale conflict or civil war situations is common in emerging and low-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and the MENA region, and the use of gendered repression to thwart the political participation of women is not unheard of. In Tunisia, not in the midst of war, women involved in the constitution-making process were harassed and threatened (Kishi 2017). While exploring GBV in conflict settings only during full-scale civil war may take into account a large proportion of sexual violence, a number of incidents are excluded, and preclude analyses that would otherwise capture the fuller spectrum of GBV on the ground.

**COVID-19**

The COVID-19 health pandemic imposes yet another layer of obstacles for Libyan and North African women in their pursuit of political participation. The impacts of restrictions, which include restrictions on internal and external travel and curfews, compounds challenges for Libyan women who already faced restrictions due to the civil war raging since 2012. The pandemic prevents travel between locales by

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11 Ibid.
women for various services, but movement was already difficult for women because of the collapse of Libya’s security apparatus. The pandemic has only worsened living conditions for Libyan women. A UN Women flash survey among 290 women across Libya gauged the pandemic’s impact on all aspects of women’s lives. The survey found COVID-19 prevention measures negatively affect women’s livelihoods, especially for self-employed women, with 52% of surveyed women reporting impacts on work, and 70% of respondents expressing fear of increased violence due to pressures from curfews and the same percentage needing support from male family members to access medical services.

COVID-19 lockdowns and curfews in Libya – and across the MENA region – likely exacerbate already high rates of domestic violence, due to growing concerns over job insecurity, cramped living spaces for large families, reduced services and difficulty in reporting violence during lockdowns, but also due to restrictive social norms that place men as heads of household and responsible for the family income (OECD 2020). If the crisis prevents men from upholding this role, frustrations may be vented in the form of violence against women and girls. Such norms, moreover, are reinforced by countries’ legal frameworks, which continue to constrain women’s agency and position in the political, social and economic lives of their country (OECD 2020).

A UN Women’s flash survey results indicate “the need to include women in decision-making and for responding organizations [to incorporate] a gender perspective when developing and implementing activities to combat COVID-19, including women frontline responders, women leaders and women networks. Activities need to respond to the varied needs of different groups and ensure that all groups, particularly women, have equal access to social protection policies, outreach and other services” (UN Women 2020).

THE ABSENCE OF WOMEN IN PEACE PROCESSES

During tumultuous or contested political transitions, impediments to women’s political participation are often present and stark, especially where debates are contentious about the role of the Sharia in the constitution and public life (Dersnah 2012, p. 61). Libya is a vivid example, as women struggle to negotiate a secure position in the political space. Women in Libya are excluded from peace-processes, despite their historical role in mediating conflicts within families and local communities. The activism of urban women was central to the 2011 uprising leading to Ghaddafi’s ouster, yet despite their public engagement, women are excluded from transition politics in what seems a reversal of Libyan women’s political empowerment (Burchfield 2019). Women were not invited to key conferences such as a Paris conference in May 2018 during which participants discussed the future of Libya. In another example, when the UN mission to Libya mediated a meeting in Libya to agree on a ceasefire in 2018, not a single woman was present. Nor are women represented on key councils and decision-making bodies, and women’s recommendations are largely absent in public fora. This result is a missed opportunity to address women’s critical needs and to take advantage of their experience with conflict resolution.

15 Tunisia is another case in point, where post-Arab Spring, women were referred to in the draft of the new constitution as partners of men. After international and domestic pressure, the language was removed.
PROMOTING POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: WHAT WORKS

In spite of the acknowledged importance of women’s political participation and robust development activities and interventions on the topic, there are few rigorous systematic studies assessing the impact of interventions on women’s political participation and empowerment either globally or in the MENA region. Results from existing research are inconclusive on the effects of interventions encouraging political participation on women’s political empowerment and there are, moreover, few rigorous, systematic studies that focus on the target group: women. Case studies, descriptive analysis, and academic studies, though, are suggestive of interventions leading to improvements. Among interventions, quotas seem to benefit women. Moreover, a regression analysis of 101 countries post-conflict finds that efforts to integrate gender equity into legal frameworks via quotas had the most significant impact on women’s empowerment (Pospieszna 2014). In the next section, we discuss quotas in more detail.

QUOTAS

Women’s involvement in political parties, as well as how parties encourage women’s participation and incorporate gender issues in their platforms, are important pathways to women’s political participation and empowerment. An effective strategy is changing the institutions by targeting support to women within political parties. A popular approach in North Africa involves political party and parliamentary quotas. Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria all have legal quotas that reserve 30% of parliamentary seats for women, which has enhanced their participation (Benstead 2015; Tripp 2012), while Libya, under Article 18 of the country’s Election Law, reserves 16% (or 32 of 200) of seats for women. Quotas are fairly popular among general populations in the MENA region. Arab Barometer survey findings indicate that more than two-thirds in the region support women’s quotas.

Research suggests such affirmative action mechanisms like quotas may influence sustainable political outcomes, participation, and thus women’s empowerment. In India, after 10 years of quotas, women were able to compete and win leadership positions on local-level councils. A 2004 survey assessing the impact of quotas, finds that women politicians tend to be more gender-sensitive in their approaches to politics. In the Indian states of West Bengal and Rajasthan there are more investments in drinking water in local governments that reserved seats for women. “This is not surprising as it is often women who do the heavy lifting when it comes to carrying water” (Btedinni 2009).

Research outcomes also suggest that female representation through quotas brings greater attention to key policy issues such as education and health, and may also shape young girls’ career goals. Results from India also show that the presence of female leadership on village councils closed the gender gap in access to health and education by 25% and 32% among resident parents and children, respectively (Tripp 2012).

In Tunisia, 31% of parliamentarians and nearly half of elected local officials are women because of gender quotas (UN Women 2018). These quotas are the product of Tunisia’s constitutional protections for women’s equal rights and its forward-thinking electoral laws, themselves a result of a combination of advocacy by female elected officials and civil society. Tunisia wrote electoral gender quotas into law, and passed a landmark law in 2017 prohibiting violence against women. Recently, the cabinet approved a

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17 Eight countries in the MENA have quotas: Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel.
new law that would provide equal inheritance for men and women, though the law was not without substantial controversy.  

In Jordan, women’s quotas introduced in the mid-2000s also increased women’s representation in parliament and on local councils. Quotas helped women from remote rural areas run for elections for the first time and contributed to increased political experience. A decade ago, women represented just 6.4% of Jordan’s House of Representatives and 12.7% of the Senate (IPU, 2017). Today, women comprise 11.5% of both houses of parliament (IPU, 2020). 

Quotas alone, however, do not necessarily translate into real influence, as they may result in “tokenization” of women representatives, or male leaders may prevent women from exerting meaningful policy impact by excluding them from influential committees (Beaman 2008). Sater (2007), in a study of women parliamentarians in Morocco, finds women parliamentarians face stereotypes and stigma—all of which hamper women’s ability to perform and advance policy initiatives that reflect women’s as well as men’s interests. Sater concludes that women parliamentarians’ power is limited by the authoritarian structure in which they operate. Others, however, note quotas may be used more strategically. In Jordan, for instance, smaller tribes tend to nominate women in districts where they are less likely to win (Bush and Gao 2017). An index developed by the U.S. government’s Wilson Center to measure women’s leadership in the MENA region found in 2020 that when women led top government departments they were four times more likely to be found in what are considered traditionally “feminized” sectors focused on various forms of caretaking, such as socio-cultural ministries, rather than sectors with large budgets and greater influence over policy areas such as defense, finance, energy or justice. As a result, women, though engaged in politics, may ultimately have less real power and influence than men, which is a distinction not captured by quantitative measures of participation (CRS 2020). In Libya, where 16% of parliamentarians are women owing to quotas, female members of parliament were challenged by institutional practices, such as holding meetings late at night when it is not socially acceptable for women to be out or in places considered unsafe for women to attend. They have also been subject to verbal intimidation by their male colleagues (CRS 2020).

**ADDRESSING LAWS AND POLICIES RELATED TO WOMEN’S STATUS**

In addition to instituting quotas, legal reforms prohibiting violence against women, eliminating discrimination against women, establishing equitable personal status codes, and instituting universal voting rights are all critical to improving women’s political participation. Several North African countries adopted changes in legal frameworks that improve the political and economic status of women. Table 1 outlines policies affecting the political rights of women and gender equity.

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18 The change in the personal status code, while hailed by the International Community, drew sharp backlash from Tunisia’s religious establishment who considered the change anathema to Islamic law.
Table 1. North African Countries with Laws and Plans Supportive of Gender Equity and Addressing GBV

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<td>Protection for Racial Minorities</td>
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<td>No CEDAW Reservations</td>
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<td>National Plan and Strategy for Gender Equity</td>
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<td>National Plan and Strategy for GBV</td>
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<td>Criminalized GBV / Domestic Violence</td>
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Source: UN Women 2018

As described previously, new and improved statutes have enhanced political participation, particularly in the cases of Tunisia and Morocco. But the gap between laws and practices persists. Despite the positive legal changes in the area of gender equality in politics in North Africa, associated norms may not be translated into everyday life. As the NDI (2017) study concludes, this is not only true with concepts like “gender,” but also understandings of “freedom,” “democracy,” “citizenship,” and even “good governance”.
INCLUDING MEN AND BOYS IN INTERVENTIONS

There is a growing body of research on the utility of including men and boys in interventions to address masculinities and related norms that exclude women in politics. Addressing men and boys at every level is valuable for confronting gendered norms and associated barriers (Wright 2014). Awareness-raising interventions among men are key and strategies should include men in communities and households, as well as male policymakers that may undervalue women’s participation. It may also be beneficial to involve local and religious leaders who are gatekeepers of norms (Castillejo 2018). Addressing real behavioral change, however, requires addressing existing masculinities and norms that reinforce those masculinities. Men and boys could be brought together in group settings, through training activities, courses or workshops, or masculinities and normative change could be addressed through broader outreach strategies that involve the media campaigns, distributing educational materials or cultural events (Wright 2014, p. 7). Combinations of these two strategies may also be useful, especially in conflict-affected contexts such as Libya (Wright 2014, p.7).

CAPACITY BUILDING THAT SUPPORTS POLITICAL WOMEN AIDED BY QUOTAS

Many interventions focus on getting women into office, and less on consolidating and furthering gains afterward. Trainings that bolster women’s capacities to perform in their new political positions are valuable and endow women with the ability to be effective leaders. Instruction that emphasizes debate skills, writing legislation, strengthened advocacy skills to further legislation, and networking events to build relationships in order to have more support for the issues and programs are useful for women (UN Women 2020).

CONFIDENCE-BUILDING TRAININGS

Donor program training on political rights and confidence building are also useful for women. In Tunisia, for instance, women received training on advocacy skills and political know-how on how to address women’s rights and gender concerns at the local level. Trainings also included confidence building exercises and how to play leadership roles at the community and regional level (UN Women 2020).

SEIZING THE MOMENT IN CONSTITUTION-MAKING PROCESSES

Transitional and constitutional processes and peace negotiations are junctures for change and thus offer an opportunity to address issues important to women. The UNDP and Inclusive Security note in a case study of the Tunisian constitutional building process that women’s inclusion and participation in constitutional processes is more likely when women are mobilized early and quickly (as in Tunisia), as the rules are established early on who will participate in constitution and transition processes (UNDP 2018).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Though economic participation is often a goal of development, it may also facilitate political participation and evidence suggests the two are mutually reinforcing. For example, Lu (2019) explains that women who benefit from financial inclusion programs have incentive to influence public policy at the local and national levels to improve labor laws, representation in government, and greater investments in women’s and girls’ education and health.
Evaluations of village savings and loans programs and cooperatives also find participation in these economic self-help mechanisms increase women's confidence, encourage collective action, and improve women’s negotiating skills vis-à-vis men. Women develop a larger role in household decision-making as they gain income and control of economic resources. Interest in improving their communities or creating a more favorable environment for economic activity may also lead to political participation at the community level. This could include running for local office, becoming involved in local organizations, holding leaders accountable, or community mobilization (Lu 2019).

Although there are theoretical links between political participation and economic participation and some evidence that is suggestive of this in practice, this review found no definitive research or evaluations confirming this relationship in international development program interventions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite advancements in reform regarding women’s political status in the MENA region, their participation in public and political life remains limited vis-à-vis that of men. The barriers to women’s political participation are varied and include, poor enforcement of relevant laws and policies, war and instability, a global health pandemic, lower income and education levels, as well as the persistence of norms that uphold men’s supremacy, among other obstacles. Although publics in the MENA region appear supportive of equal rights of women to hold political office, citizens express doubts about women’s suitability for political leadership. There is a paucity of evidence-based research examining the impact of interventions and approaches designed to address women’s political participation in the region. The lack of rigorous evaluation and studies, however, is one that is global and not just limited to the MENA region. Against this backdrop, existing case studies and research suggest a range of recommendations that might be useful for advancing women’s political participation in North Africa and the broader Middle East.

- **Instituting quotas for women in political institutions provides benefits for political participation of women in the MENA region.** Quotas enhance women’s symbolic and actual political representation and thus their political participation and may also contribute to legislation and services responsive to women’s interests. Quotas are also instrumental for women “getting their foot in the door” and proving their merit, resulting in more women winning elections. In addition, quotas may increase political women’s self-efficacy (Zetterberg 2009).

- **Although quotas create opportunities for women’s political participation, they are not sufficient and do not always translate into influence.** Capacity gaps, party support, funding gaps and stigma stymie women’s progress in national parliaments. Interventions should, therefore, include training augmenting the political skills of women so they are effective leaders, advocates, and negotiators. Male politicians also play a role as they hold and perpetuate stereotypes against women. Interventions targeted towards male politicians that raise awareness

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19 A parallel literature review on Women and Economic Participation in the MENA also found some evidence suggesting women’s economic inclusion projects can facilitate political participation at the local level. Studies on village savings and loans institutions in developing countries show that some women that participated in these financial mechanisms ran for local office, participated in informal local institutions, and engaged in community mobilization and decision-making. See: Audra Grant, “Economic Participation in the Middle East and North Africa: Select Literature Review.” Washington, DC: USAID (2020).
regarding women’s roles and rights and that also address social norms that are discriminatory against women are also critical.

- **In the same vein, build women’s capacity to identify sources of finance for campaigns.** This is an area where there exists a significant gender gap. The deficit is probably larger for new women candidates than incumbents, though the latter category may still encounter hurdles.

- **In developing a bench of political talent, training for women to develop and enhance campaigning skills is also vital.** Other skill-building efforts might also focus on those that enhance women’s self-confidence in addition to increasing women’s knowledge around political rights.

- **Increasing women’s political participation takes time, but could be accelerated by addressing discriminatory social norms and adopting measures for women beyond quotas, such as through “zipper lists,” OECD (2019) suggests.** Zipper lists, which alternate names of women and men at the top of party lists during elections to make women more competitive with men, are considered among the most advantageous measures available to ensure that women are elected (Dougherty 2012). In Libya, 32 women were elected to the General National Congress in 2012 as a result of zipper list (2012, p. 1). Policy makers’ awareness of these alternative measures is low, however (OECD 2019), and more awareness-raising and advocacy is needed here.

- **Men and boys must be included in interventions aimed at increasing women’s political participation through awareness-raising (Wright 2014).** As mentioned, some men policy makers may place less value to women’s participation, yet their dominance of institutions necessitates their engagement in interventions that are designed for women. Interventions should address masculinities that contribute to stigmas, stereotypes, and discrimination against women. Engagement of men and boys should occur throughout all phases, from awareness raising, gender-sensitive training, to being mobilized as male champions. Relatedly, informal and traditional actors, such as tribal, religious, family and community leaders (who are often men) are considered the custodians of norms and tradition, and are important avenues for engagement around changing discriminatory norms. Involving families and communities is also key, as women face backlash and constraints from these groups in efforts to engage in political life. However, many argue the short-term timeframes usually adopted for these types of interventions are less effective than longer-term efforts; a program cycle of at least 3-4 years or longer is better for sustainable outcomes (NORAD 2015).

- **In conflict-affected settings, expand women’s roles in key processes (particularly in conflict-affected or transitional settings) by considering reform of institutions that have the most significant influence on women’s political participation.** In contexts like Libya, this includes women’s involvement in peace-processes and constitution-building, as well as peace and reconciliation mechanisms. Interventions should support advocacy for women’s inclusion in peace processes and national dialogue and for including women’s interests in proposed future institutions and legal frameworks. It is useful for women to mobilize early and quickly to capture the momentum of peace and constitution-building processes. Establishing links with other women’s networks and organizations is also important to coalesce around an agreed set of goals that should be achieved.
Looking to Libya, Libyan women facilitate many of the informal peace processes in their country and they play critical roles in mediating and negotiating disputes in their local communities and clans. Their formal involvement in the country’s national peace process, however, is critical, and may be enabled with more involvement from international organizations like the UN.

- **Information communication technologies (ICT) and social media platforms may expose Libyan – and all MENA – women to new political spaces and forums that are less costly, more informal and safer.** Research indicates that social media platforms are growing as a form of public participation. However, even here there is a gender divide in the MENA region, where internet penetration rates are higher for men (61%) than women (47%), according to International Telecommunications Union (ITU) 2019 figures. In fact, the gender gap for internet penetration rates is highest across the Arab countries of the MENA. Thus, efforts encouraging use of social media platforms as forms of participation should ensure women first have access to the technologies. Here, men and boys engagement would also be beneficial for creating a more enabling environment for Libyan women’s access to ICT.

- **On the whole, more rigorous systematic evaluation and research exploring the impact of interventions on political participation of women in the MENA region (and elsewhere) is warranted.**

For example, more research is needed on the ability of women to develop informal intraparty networks and the impact of those networks on women’s ability to influence policy and benefit from mobility within the party. Research is also scarce on the relationship between informal networks and service provision (Benstead and Lust 2015). Work on networks characterized by tribe, ethnicity and religion may also yield more nuanced information.

It is assumed increasing women’s representation – through quotas or other means – increases the likelihood women will focus on issues central to women’s interests such as access to health and education. However, there is little systematic research in this area in the MENA region. The healthy number of women parliamentarians (owed to quotas) provides an opportunity to expand the line of inquiry in these research areas.

Research and systematic evaluation that considers the influence of men and boys in intervention outcomes around women’s political participation would also be valuable. Surveys suggest women’s political behavior is shaped by men and family members. Engaging men and boys in awareness programs that enhance their knowledge around women’s rights and the value of women’s political participation is critical. For women candidates, male champions might provide support and mentorship.

Quality research about the impact of legislative innovations on changes to women’s political participation and empowerment is also lacking. The literature review notes that against the backdrop of legislation in North Africa protecting women’s rights to vote and participate in politics, there is little known about the influence and policy change on women’s participation, thus more research is needed in this area. Moreover, there is a dearth of rigorous evidence on the relationship between women’s political participation and economic empowerment. More research would be valuable in this area, given the intuitive links between women’s economic empowerment and political advocacy and representation. Importantly, research would need to disentangle this
“chicken-and-egg” relationship to explore whether greater economic participation encourages civic participation or whether civic participation encourages economic participation.
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