

Women's Political Presence in the Arab Mediterranean Region

Governance, Contentious Politics, and Agency

Valentine Moghadam



Illustrator: [Carole Hénaff](#)

The first two decades of the 21st century has seen its share of dramatic events: the “war on terror” launched in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 assaults on U.S. cities; the 2003 US/UK-led invasion and occupation of Iraq; the 2008 financial crisis and the Great Recession; the 2011 Arab uprisings, Occupy Wall Street, and European anti-austerity protests; the NATO assault on Libya and external intervention in Syria; the 2015 migration crisis; the global expansion of right-wing populist movements and governments; a new cycle of protests in France, Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Lebanon, and the U.S. in 2018-2020; and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership has been unable to shape those events and their outcomes. Equally clear is that women have been involved in and affected by those events in multiple ways, whether as agents or victims. In this paper, I examine the Arab Mediterranean region to elucidate women’s presence in varied movements and mobilizations, and their participation in national and local governance. Indeed, women’s intensive involvement in both institutional and non-institutional politics – in governance, civil society, and contentious politics – has been a

hallmark of 21st century leadership and activism. Women's presence, however, varies across countries. Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia have long had vocal and visible women's rights organizations with the capacity to influence legislation, and the adoption of gender quotas and proportional representation electoral systems has enabled a relatively large female presence in local and national governance.

This paper examines expressions of feminist contentious politics, women's involvement in broader protest movements, and implications for old and emerging forms of governance. It highlights demands for new gendered social contracts, more responsive government, and societal change. Despite the region's serious economic and employment challenges as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, women's continued activism in both civil society and political society reflects the profound social changes that have occurred over the past four decades, with implications for democratization.

Women in Non-institutional and Contentious Politics

Arab Mediterranean women have a long history of involvement in broad socio-political movements, from Egypt's 1919 revolution to the mid-century independence movements of Algeria and Morocco to the 1987 Palestinian Intifada. The largest displays of female involvement in mass protests have come about in the new century, exemplified by Tunisian and Egyptian women's presence in the January-February 2011 uprisings. Women's public and political presence results from advances in educational attainment over the past forty years, with high tertiary enrollments enabling women's entry into an array of professions. It also results from the growth of numerous women's rights organizations and other non-governmental and civil society organizations representing women's concerns and aspirations. The 1980s saw growing concerns over the diffusion of Islamic fundamentalism and thus the emergence of anti-fundamentalist networks and movements and new feminist groups; the 1990s saw considerable organizing and mobilizing for change in alignment with the Beijing process and the global women's rights agenda; and the new century saw increasingly audacious critiques of authoritarianism and patriarchy, with concomitant calls for democracy and women's empowerment.

Such forms of feminist engagement, or "politics-from-below" [1], are distinguished from the variants of "state feminism" that prevailed in Tunisia during the Bourguiba and Ben Ali periods or in Egypt under Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak. Still, when Algerian president Bouteflika appointed five women to his cabinet in 2002 and in 2005 proffered some amendments to the family law, this act of state feminism was in fact a reward for women's suffering and feminist defiance during the "black decade" of Islamist terrorism, and a (partial) response to feminist demands for an egalitarian family law. In Morocco, the landmark 2004 family law reform, approved by the King and adopted by the parliament, was the product of a decade-long advocacy campaign by Moroccan feminists in the Union d'action feminine (UAF) and the Association démocratique des femmes du maroc (ADFM), starting with the 1993 One Million Signatures campaign. Egyptian women took part in the 2005 Kefaya (Enough) movement criticizing the contested presidential election, and after 2011 formed many new groups focused on the pervasive problem of sexual harassment and

abuse of women in public spaces. In 2011-2013, Tunisian feminists organized rallies to defy Islamist calls for a rollback of women's rights legislation [2].

Arab Mediterranean women have expressed individual and especially collective agency, which often has included coalitions with other civil society actors as well as with allies in political parties, that has resulted in the passage of new laws and policies for women's participation and rights

The decades of feminist advocacy have borne fruit in the form of legal and policy reforms. In the early years of the current century, Morocco joined Tunisia in permitting women equal rights to divorce when its family law, the Moudawana, was reformed. At around the same time, Rana al-Husseini's journalistic advocacy in Jordan drew attention to the serious social problem of "honor crimes". Elsewhere, feminists highlighted other forms of violence against women, including domestic violence, workplace sexual harassment, the daily indignities of women in public spaces. In September 2013, the Egyptian state criminalized sexual harassment in response to tremendous pressure from women's groups such as HarassMap, WenDo, Nazra for Feminist Studies, and the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, which had long sought to draw official attention to the problem [3]. (In November 2013, however, the Egyptian government banned free assembly and public demonstrations.) Feminists also sought the repeal of laws and practices enabling the rapist of an unmarried girl to escape punishment by marrying his victim. Egypt began the regional trend when it abolished such "marry your rapist" laws in 1999, followed by Morocco in 2014, Tunisia, Jordan, and Lebanon in 2017, and Palestine in 2018. Tunisia's July 2017 anti-VAW law (loi integral 58) contains sections on "prevention", "protection and support", and "prosecution" [4] The new laws are closely monitored by the region's feminist organizations and women-led NGOs, many of which are registered on the platform of the Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation [5].

More advances have come about, such as the Moroccan government's adoption in spring 2019 of laws to grant rural women property rights over land, another advocacy victory for the ADFM. On the other hand, the Tunisian feminist campaign for equal inheritance rights stalled after the death of President Essebsi. Meanwhile, women of varied backgrounds took part in the renewed 2018-2020 cycle of protests in Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia around unemployment, government incompetence, and privatization of public services or their deteriorating conditions. In Algeria, amid protests in February 2019 against a fifth term for the ailing president, a group of feminist intellectuals penned a solidarity statement and called for social and gender equality [6]. In all these ways, Arab Mediterranean women have expressed individual and especially collective agency. It is precisely such collective agency, which often has included coalitions with other civil society actors as well as with allies in political parties, that has resulted in the passage of new laws and policies for women's participation and rights.

Arab Mediterranean Women in Institutional Politics

The study of Arab Mediterranean women's presence in the formal political process is relatively new. The aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings gave impetus to this new line of inquiry, in part because the adoption of gender quotas – a key demand of women's rights organizations, bolstered by the UN's global women's rights agenda – led to dramatic increases in women's parliamentary presence. Although the appointment of women in cabinet positions predates the Arab Spring (e.g., women cabinet ministers in Algeria, Jordan, and Morocco), women's parliamentary representation was very low. Whereas Algeria's 2007 elections rendered a 7.7% female share, the 2012 gender quota increased it to 31.6%, although by 2019 this had declined to 26 percent. Morocco's female share was 10.5% in 2010, 17% in 2012, and 20.5% in 2019. (Moroccan political parties had introduced informal gender quotas in 2002, replaced in 2011 by the formal quota.) Tunisia, which had adopted an informal quota in 2004, had started from a higher base – a 27.6% female share in 2009 which remained steady until the big jump to 36% in the 2014 parliamentary elections. Other Arab Mediterranean countries trail behind the three Maghreb countries in the proportion of women members of parliament (MPs): Jordan and Egypt 15%, Libya 16%, Syria 13%, and Lebanon 4.7 percent.

It should be noted that the Maghreb figures exceed those of Greece and Cyprus (18-19%), Turkey (17%), and Malta (12%). Tunisia's 36% parliamentary female share is tied with that of Italy and Portugal, and it is higher than Israel's 29 percent. (This compares to a 25% world average of women MPs.) [7]. What Morocco, Tunisia and, to a lesser degree Algeria, share are close ties between women's rights advocates in civil society and those in the political parties and government; such synergies have helped raise the legal status and social positions of women and secured important legal and policy reforms.

Tunisia is in many ways a unique case, as it began with a higher level of female political representation even before democratization, and it adopted a gender parity clause in the 2014 constitution: women were intensely involved in the constitutional process

A study of women MPs' involvement in legislative committees [8] classified the committees as "power", "economic and foreign affairs", "social issues", and "women's issues", and found that whereas Tunisian women MPs' committee distribution was more representative of their overall representation, the women MPs in Algeria and Morocco were overrepresented in the "social issues" committees. They concluded that women's political tenure and expertise as well as the duration of quota systems are salient factors in determining women's substantive representation and membership in influential legislative committees [9].

Tunisia is in many ways a unique case, as it began with a higher level of female political representation even before democratization, and it adopted a gender parity clause in the

2014 constitution. Women were intensely involved in the constitutional process, including as members of the Constituent Assembly and in its leadership [10]. Tunisia also saw impressive increases in women's presence in local elections; indeed, the current female share of local governance seats is twice the global average.

Local governance

As seen in Table 1, of the nine Arab Mediterranean countries examined in this paper, all have quotas at the local as well as national levels except for Lebanon and Syria. Tunisia does best on women's representation in both national and local governance.

According to a UN report on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, in 103 countries and areas with relevant data, women's representation in elected local deliberative bodies varied from less than one percent to close to parity (50 percent), with a median of 26 percent. Women's representation in local government is 40% or higher in only 15 countries and areas; Tunisia is among that elite group, and in 2018 Tunisian women's share of local council seats was 48.5 percent, compared with the MENA average of 17.7 percent [11]. As at the national level, Tunisia even before 2011 was [as noted] ahead of other countries at the local level, and women held about 27% of municipal seats. As I have argued elsewhere [12], Tunisian women's public presence prior to the Arab Spring uprisings helped protect and indeed expand their participation, rights, and leadership afterwards.

Studies show that where legislated gender quotas are adopted, significantly higher proportions of women are elected at both national and local levels

Studies show that where legislated gender quotas are adopted, significantly higher proportions of women are elected at both national and local levels [13]. As of 2020, the quotas for women at the subnational level in the Arab Mediterranean states are: 30-35% in Algeria; 30% in Morocco and Jordan; 25% in Egypt; and 20% in Palestine. In Tunisia, Law 7 of 2017, amending the 2014 electoral law, stipulates gender parity at the subnational/municipal level. Until 2007 Algerian women comprised just 8.2% of representatives in local councils, but this jumped to 17.6% in the most recent year. (See Table 1.) In Morocco in 2003, just 0.5% of elected municipal representatives were women; today, after implementing a quota, women account for 21% of local councilors.

Women's Agency: Enabling Factors and Challenges

Quotas, therefore, matter as pathways to Arab Mediterranean women's political representation and to societal change. In turn, rising educational attainment, civil society engagement, and work experience across occupations and professions have broadened the pool of women available for public office. By 2010, Algerian women constituted 38 percent, and Tunisian women 42 percent, of university teaching staff. The field of law has seen a

large presence of women, with women lawyers as key figures in legal reform in Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia. Women journalists, film directors, authors, and bloggers have increased women's public visibility. A key indicator of changes in gender relations is the presence of women judges, given that orthodox interpretations of Sharia law prevent women from serving as judges, and the testimony of two women is equal to that of one man. In Algeria in 2010, 37% of all judges were women; in Morocco, the figure was 24% and in Tunisia 28 percent. About half of Tunisia's constitutional court was female in 2010 [14], and in 2012 a woman served as president of an Administrative Court. In Morocco, female representation on the high court increased from 23% in 2004 to 26% in 2010. As a result of Morocco's 2011 constitutional amendments and Article 111 permitting judges to form independent associations, women jurists formed l'Association marocaine des femmes juges; one priority is to "promote a culture of gender equality and equal opportunities." By 2018, 42% of judges in Algeria, 23.5% in Morocco, and 43% in Tunisia were women [15].

Challenges remain, however, in terms of both conservative attitudes and values and the limited employment opportunities for different classes of women. Both the World Values Survey (waves 6 and 7) and the Arab Barometer find that a large majority of citizens – in the order of 70 percent – agree or strongly agree that men make better political leaders. Women's agreement is somewhat less but still high (about 60%). Wave 6 of the WVS took place between 2010 and 2014, and Wave 7 between 2017 and 2020. Egypt and Jordan, included in both waves, remain very conservative regarding women and men as political leaders. In contrast, the change in Tunisia is impressive, showing the difference that women's political representation can make. Whereas during Wave 6 fully 72.5% of men and 61% of women agreed that men make better political leaders, Wave 7 shows those figures dropping to 57.7% male and 48.4% female agreement [16]. Attitudes are least conservative in Morocco and Lebanon. In Wave 6, just 51% of Lebanese women respondents agreed that men made better political leaders; in Morocco it was a mere 45 percent. In wave 7, the figures for Lebanon are even more striking: just 46% male agreement and 36% female agreement that men make better political leaders. (Morocco was not surveyed in Wave 7.) Given that Lebanon has not adopted a gender quota and has insignificant female parliamentary, ministerial, and local representation (see Table 1), such values are likely due to high dissatisfaction with the male-run confessional system, as well as the presence of a sizable Christian and liberal population of citizens.

The Arab Barometer Wave V findings align with those of the WVS. Although most Arab citizens find it acceptable to have a female president or prime minister, only Tunisia, Lebanon, and especially Morocco show relatively egalitarian attitudes on women's political leadership. Indeed, just 46% of Moroccan men and a mere 25% of women agree that men make better political leaders. Algerians, however, are far more in favor of male political leaders – surely a counter-intuitive finding, given the dissatisfaction with the male-dominated *le pouvoir* and the mass protests of 2019. As with the WVS, the Arab Barometer finds entrenched conservative views among Jordanians and especially Egyptians [17].

Although most Arab citizens find it acceptable to have a female

president or prime minister, only Tunisia, Lebanon, and especially Morocco show relatively egalitarian attitudes on women's political leadership

At the same time, only a minority of Arab Mediterranean women are interested in politics, on the order of 21-24 percent, with the lowest rates in Egypt and Algeria (12-13%). One reason may have to do with the disappointing record of politicians across the countries, especially on economic and employment issues. (Male interest in politics is similarly low, though higher than women's, according to the 2018-19 Arab Barometer findings.) Another may be that the impressive increase in women's access to professional jobs pertains to a small fraction of the economically active female population, favoring the highly educated and women from more liberal households. Women from less-educated, lower-income, and more conservative households are less likely to seek work, given insecure working conditions. Even so, the highest unemployment rates are among college-educated women, who seek jobs but face dwindling opportunities in both public and private sectors. The decline in tourism as well as foreign direct investment has only exacerbated the longstanding problem of youth and female unemployment. But women's low interest also may have to do with women's family responsibilities. Women's care work and domestic labor consume considerable time and energy, exacerbated by the absence of affordable and quality pre-school or childcare facilities [18].

Finally, conflict and instability in parts of the Arab Mediterranean region impede women's political participations by increasing the risks of their public presence; Libya is clearly an example (e.g., the killings of prominent women activists after 2011). The Syrian conflict and forced internal displacement as well as out-migration have set back any advances that women had made, while also creating vast numbers of women and girls in vulnerable, precarious, and risky situations. Still, a positive sign is that in 2019, "the Syrian Government and opposition groups agreed to establish a Constitutional Committee to begin working on constitutional reform. Women are represented in both the Constitutional Committee and drafting Committee due, in large part, to international intervention as part of the internationally mediated peace process." [19].

Conclusions and Recommendations

Twenty-five years after the Barcelona Process, the regional cooperation that could mitigate the economic and employment problems plaguing the Arab Mediterranean countries has yet to be realized, especially given the growth of right-wing populist parties and governments in Europe [20]. Support for democracy remains high in Arab Mediterranean countries, especially among those countries with Islamist political parties in government, but such support is not necessarily stable in the face of physical and economic insecurity [21]. These realities have implications for Arab Mediterranean women's agency and empowerment. The Arab Spring uprisings have seen limited progress in the quality and legitimacy of state institutions, public services, and the private sector, suggesting the need for new forms of governance inclusive of women's knowledge and capacity. Also needed is increased interaction, coordination, and collaborations between women's rights organizations and the

women's parliamentary caucuses within countries, across borders, and between the Arab and European Mediterranean partners. Cross-border synergies could serve the dual purpose of enhancing women's political presence and power and improving regional peace, women's security, and progress for all citizens.

Table 1. Political Systems, Electoral Quotas, and Women's Representation, Arab Mediterranean Countries (circa 2020)

Country	Type of political system	Type of electoral quota (year of adoption)	Women's share parliamentary seats, % (most recent year)	Women's share, local governance (2018-2019)	Women in ministerial positions (F share)*
Algèria	Republic (multi-party)	Legislated variable quotas 20%-50% at both national and local (2012)	26% (2017)	17,6%	13%
Egipte	Republic (authoritarian military)	Not legislated at national level; 25% for local councils (2014)	15% (2015)	-	24%
Jordània	Monarchy (constitutional)	Legislated 15 reserved seats at national; 30% at local (2010, 2012)	15% (2016)	32%	21%
Líban	Republic (confessional)	None	4,7% (2019)	4%	3,4%
Líbia	Failed /divided state	Legislated zipper list at national level (2012, 2013); reserved seats at local "for revolutionaries with special needs and women"	16% (2014)	-	-

Marroc	Monarchy (constitutional, multi-party)	Legislated 60 reserved seats at national level; 30% at sub-national level (regional councils)	21% (2016)	21%	5,6%
Autoritat Palestina	-	20% local elections (2005)	13% (2006)	-	-
Rep. Àrab Siriana	Republic	N/A	13% (2016)	7%	13%
Tunísia	Republic (democratic, multi-party)	Legislated zipper list for both national and local; 2014 constitution stipulates gender parity	25% (2019)	48,5%	10%

Sources: Gender Quotas Database / International IDEA,

<https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/database>. Local government:

<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/indicators/database/>

* World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2020* (all sources accessed September 2020).

REFERENCES

- 1 — Charrad, Mounira M. and Amina Zarrugh. 2014. "Equal or complementary? Women in the new Tunisian Constitution after the Arab Spring." *The Journal of North African Studies* 19 (2): 230-243.
- 2 — Moghadam, Valentine M. 2013. *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers. 3rd ed.
- 3 — Abdelmonem, Angie and Susana Galán. 2017. "Action-Oriented Responses to sexual harassment in Egypt: The Cases of HarassMap and WenDo." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13 (1): 154-164
- 4 — El Watan, « Declaration: Femmes Algeriennes pour un changement vers l'égalité (21 March 2019), Available [online](#).
- 5 — See the Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation [website](#).
- 6 — El Watan, « Declaration: Femmes Algeriennes pour un changement vers l'égalité (21 March 2019), available at www.elwatan.com/.
- 7 — All data from the Interparliamentary Union, Available [online](#).

- 8 — Shalaby, Marwa and Laila Elimam. 2017. “Women in Legislative Committees in Arab Parliaments.” Carnegie Sada Middle East Analysis (April 26), Available [online](#).
- 9 — It is worth noting that women’s concentration in “social issues” mirrors the worldwide concentration of female cabinet ministers in the portfolios of Social Affairs; Family/Children/Youth/Elderly/Disabled; Environment/Natural Resources/Energy; Employment/Labor/Vocational Training. See UN Women, “Women in Politics 2019” (map), Available [online](#).
- 10 — International IDEA. 2019. Women Constitution-Makers: Comparative Experiences with Representation, Participation and Influence. Stockholm: International IDEA.
- 11 — See this [website](#).
- 12 — Moghadam, 2018. “Explaining Divergent Outcomes of the Arab Spring: The Significance of Gender and Women’s Mobilizations.” *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 6 (4). First on-line 31 Jan. 2017, Available [online](#).
- 13 — UN 2019, p. 26
- 14 — OECD and CAWTAR. 2012. Women in Public Life: Gender, Law, and Policy in the Middle East and North Africa. MENA OECD Governance Project in cooperation with CAWTAR, Tunis. Paris: OECD
- 15 — ESCWA. 2018. “Women in the Judiciary: A Stepping Stone towards Gender Justice.” Beirut: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA).
- 16 — Author analysis of WVS results for questions V51 (Wave 6) and Q29 (Wave 7).
- 17 — Author analysis of Arab Barometer surveys. See also [this](#).
- 18 — Karshenas, Massoud and Valentine M. Moghadam. 2021. “Female Labour Force Participation and Women’s Employment: Puzzles, Problems, and Research.” In Hassan Hakimian (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Middle East Economics*.
- 19 — International IDEA. 2019. Women Constitution-Makers: Comparative Experiences with Representation, Participation and Influence. Stockholm: International IDEA.
- 20 — Woertz, Eckart and Eduard Soler i Lecha. 2020. “Populism and EuroMediterranean cooperation: The Barcelona Process 25 years after.” *Mediterranean Politics*, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2020.1799165
- 21 — Cammett, Melani, Ishac Diwan, and Irina Vartanova. 2020. “Insecurity and political values in the Arab world.” *Democratization*, 27(5): 699-716.



Valentine Moghadam

Valentine M. Moghadam is Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at Northeastern University, Boston. Born in Tehran, Iran, Moghadam received her higher education in Canada and the U.S. In addition to her academic career, she has been Coordinator of the Research Program on Women and Development at the UNU’s WIDER Institute (Helsinki, 1990-1995) and a section chief on gender equality and development, UNESCO’s Social and Human Sciences Sector (Paris, 2004-2006). Among her many publications, she authored the award-winning *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (2005), and *Globalization and Social Movements: The Populist Challenge and Democratic Alternatives* (2020).