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# Political Participation of Women in Morocco: Issues and Perspectives

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YAMNA AZIZI<sup>1</sup> AND ABDEL MOUNIM BOUZELMAT<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Women's political participation in Morocco has evolved significantly over the past few decades, reflecting broader socio-political changes and a growing recognition of gender equality as a cornerstone of democratic governance. This article examines the historical context, current challenges, and future perspectives of women's involvement in Moroccan politics. By analyzing key policies, social dynamics, and cultural factors, the study highlights both the progress made and the barriers that persist in achieving equitable political representation.*

**Keywords:** *Women's political participation, Morocco, gender equality, political representation, socio-political change.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The participation of women in the political sphere is essential for the democratic health and social progress of any nation. In Morocco, the journey towards gender equality in politics has been long and complex, marked by both achievements and ongoing challenges. While significant strides have been made, numerous barriers still prevent women from fully participating in the political process.

Women's political participation is not just about representation; it is crucial for ensuring that the diversity of a society is reflected in its governance. When women are underrepresented, their perspectives and needs are often marginalized, resulting in policies that may not address the concerns of the entire population. Furthermore, the inclusion of women in political decision-making can lead to more comprehensive and inclusive policies that benefit society as a whole.

Morocco, located at the crossroads of African, Arab, and Mediterranean cultures, has seen its approach to gender issues shaped by a variety of historical, cultural, social, and legal factors. Since gaining independence in 1956, Morocco has undergone significant transformations, yet the early post-independence period was characterized by a conservative approach to gender

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<sup>1</sup> Author is a PhD Candidate at Research and Studies Laboratory in Constitutional Law and Political and Social Sciences, FSJESAC, Hassan II University, Casablanca, Morocco.

<sup>2</sup> Author is a Professor at Research and Studies Laboratory in Constitutional Law and Political and Social Sciences, FSJESAC, Hassan II University, Casablanca, Morocco.

roles, with women largely excluded from formal political power.

Over time, both internal advocacy and external pressures have gradually opened spaces for women in the political arena. Legal reforms, such as the 2004 Family Code (Moudawana) and the 2011 Constitution, have been instrumental in promoting gender equality and increasing women's political participation. Despite these advancements, the path to full political participation for Moroccan women remains challenging, with cultural norms, socio-economic barriers, and entrenched patriarchal structures continuing to limit their involvement.

## **II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The historical context of women's political participation in Morocco is deeply intertwined with the broader socio-political transformations that have shaped the country since its independence in 1956. Understanding this history is crucial to comprehending the current state of gender equality in Moroccan politics and the ongoing challenges that women face in this sphere.

### **(A) Post-Independence Period (1956-1980s)**

Morocco's independence from French and Spanish colonial rule in 1956 marked the beginning of a new era in its political development. However, the immediate post-independence period was characterized by a conservative approach to gender roles, heavily influenced by traditional patriarchal values. Women were largely excluded from formal political power, and their roles were primarily confined to the private sphere, centered around family and domestic responsibilities.

During this time, the political system in Morocco was dominated by male elites, and there was little space for women in the decision-making processes. The 1962 Constitution, while recognizing the principle of equality, did not translate into substantial political opportunities for women. The legal framework at that time provided limited avenues for women to engage in politics, and societal norms further reinforced the notion that politics was a male domain.

### **(B) Emergence of Women's Movements (1980s-1990s)**

The late 20th century saw the gradual emergence of women's movements in Morocco, which began to challenge the status quo and advocate for greater rights and representation. These movements were influenced by global trends in feminism and human rights, as well as the specific socio-political dynamics within Morocco.

During the 1980s and 1990s, women's organizations started to play a more prominent role in civil society, raising awareness about gender inequality and pushing for legal reforms. These groups were instrumental in bringing issues such as women's education, health, and legal rights

to the forefront of public discourse. The feminist movement in Morocco during this period laid the groundwork for the legal reforms that would follow.

A key turning point came in 1993 with the reform of the Family Code (Moudawana), which granted women more rights within the family structure. This reform was the result of years of advocacy by women's groups and marked a significant step towards gender equality. Although the Moudawana did not directly address political participation, it represented a shift in the state's approach to women's rights and set the stage for further advancements.

### **(C) Legal Reforms and Political Quotas (2000s-Present)**

The early 2000s marked a new chapter in the history of women's political participation in Morocco. In 2002, the introduction of the quota system was a landmark moment, aimed at increasing women's representation in the Parliament. This system reserved 30 seats for women in the House of Representatives, which was later expanded to 60 seats. The quota system was seen as a necessary measure to overcome the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that had long kept women out of politics.

The 2004 reform of the Moudawana was another significant milestone. This reform expanded women's rights in marriage, divorce, and custody, further reinforcing the state's commitment to gender equality. The Moudawana reform also had an indirect impact on women's political participation by empowering women and challenging traditional gender roles.

The most significant legal reform in recent history was the adoption of the new Constitution in 2011. This Constitution enshrined the principle of gender equality and mandated the state to work towards achieving gender parity in all aspects of public life, including politics. Article 19 of the Constitution explicitly calls for equal rights and responsibilities for men and women, while Article 30 ensures equal access to political office.

### **(D) The Impact of Legal Reforms on Women's Political Participation**

The legal reforms of the 2000s and 2010s have had a profound impact on women's political participation in Morocco. The introduction of the quota system led to a significant increase in the number of women in Parliament, from 0.6% in 1993 to over 20% by 2021. These reforms also paved the way for women to take on leadership roles within political parties and civil society organizations.

However, the impact of these reforms has been uneven. While the quota system has succeeded in increasing the numerical representation of women, it has not fully addressed the structural and cultural barriers that limit women's influence in politics. Many women in Parliament still

face significant challenges in asserting their authority and participating in decision-making processes. Moreover, the presence of women in political institutions has not necessarily translated into gender-sensitive policies or legislation.

### **(E) Regional and Global Context**

The evolution of women's political participation in Morocco must also be understood within the broader regional and global context. In comparison to other countries in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, Morocco has made notable progress in advancing women's rights and political participation. The introduction of quotas and the adoption of gender equality provisions in the Constitution have placed Morocco ahead of many of its regional peers.

Globally, Morocco's progress is also significant, though there is still much work to be done to reach the levels of gender parity seen in some Western countries. The international community, including organizations like the United Nations and the European Union, has played a role in encouraging and supporting Morocco's efforts to improve gender equality. These international influences, combined with domestic advocacy, have contributed to the ongoing evolution of women's political participation in Morocco.

## **III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT**

Morocco has made significant strides in enhancing women's political representation through a series of legal reforms and institutional measures. These efforts reflect a broader commitment to gender equality, enshrined in the country's legal framework, which has evolved considerably over the past few decades. However, the effectiveness of these reforms is often tempered by enduring cultural and institutional barriers that continue to limit women's full participation in political life.

### **(A) The Quota System: A Double-Edged Sword**

One of the most notable legal measures implemented to increase women's representation in Morocco is the quota system, introduced in 2002. This system reserves a certain percentage of parliamentary seats specifically for women, which was initially set at 30 seats and later expanded to 60 seats in the House of Representatives. The introduction of the quota system was a significant step forward, as it provided women with a guaranteed foothold in the political arena (Sater, 2007).

However, while the quota system has increased the numerical representation of women in Parliament, its impact on substantive political power is more ambiguous. Critics argue that the quota system can sometimes result in the tokenistic inclusion of women, where their roles are

more symbolic than influential. Women occupying these reserved seats may find themselves sidelined in decision-making processes, with limited opportunities to shape policy or advance a gender-sensitive agenda (Darhour & Dahlerup, 2013).

The effectiveness of the quota system is also undermined by the persistence of patriarchal norms within political parties. Despite the formal mechanisms in place to support women's political participation, the male-dominated structure of most political parties means that women often struggle to gain leadership positions or exert influence within their parties. As a result, the quota system, while necessary, is not sufficient on its own to ensure meaningful political participation for women (Benstead, 2018).

### **(B) The 2011 Constitution: Enshrining Gender Equality**

The adoption of the 2011 Constitution marked a watershed moment in Morocco's legal landscape, particularly regarding gender equality. This Constitution enshrined the principle of gender equality and mandated the state to take proactive measures to achieve parity in all areas of public life, including politics. Article 19 of the Constitution explicitly states that men and women have equal rights and responsibilities, while Article 30 guarantees equal access to political office for all citizens (Ennaji, 2016).

The 2011 Constitution also established the Authority for Equality and the Fight against All Forms of Discrimination (Instance de l'Égalité et de la Lutte contre toutes les formes de Discrimination, or IER), tasked with promoting gender equality and monitoring progress in this area. This institution plays a crucial role in ensuring that the principles enshrined in the Constitution are translated into concrete actions and policies.

Despite these advances, the implementation of the constitutional provisions on gender equality has faced challenges. The gap between the legal framework and the reality of women's political participation remains significant. While the Constitution provides a strong foundation for gender equality, translating these principles into practice requires ongoing efforts and sustained political will (Charrad, 2009).

### **(C) Institutional Support and Challenges**

Beyond the legal framework, institutional support for women's political participation is essential for translating legal rights into real political power. Various institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, have been established to support women in politics and to promote gender equality more broadly.

For example, the Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family, and Social Development has been

instrumental in developing policies and programs aimed at empowering women and increasing their participation in public life. Additionally, numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups in Morocco work to support women's political engagement, providing training, resources, and advocacy (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2008).

However, these institutions often face significant challenges, including limited resources, resistance from conservative segments of society, and the deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes that persist within political and social structures. Moreover, while institutional support is crucial, it must be coupled with broader cultural and societal changes to be truly effective. Without a shift in societal attitudes towards women in politics, legal and institutional measures will have limited impact.

#### **(D) The Role of Political Parties**

Political parties are the primary vehicles for political participation in any democracy, and their role in promoting or hindering women's political participation in Morocco is critical. Despite the legal reforms and institutional support for gender equality, political parties in Morocco remain predominantly male-dominated, and women often struggle to gain leadership positions within these structures.

The internal dynamics of political parties can either facilitate or obstruct women's political careers. Parties that are committed to gender equality often implement internal quotas, provide training for female candidates, and actively promote women within their ranks. However, in many cases, women within political parties face barriers such as tokenism, exclusion from key decision-making processes, and lack of support from male colleagues (Karam, 1998).

To address these challenges, it is essential for political parties to adopt more inclusive practices and to actively work towards creating an environment that supports women's political participation. This includes not only increasing the number of women candidates but also ensuring that women have the opportunity to take on meaningful leadership roles within the party and in government (Tripp, 2013).

### **IV. CHALLENGES TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

Despite significant legal reforms and efforts to increase the representation of women in Moroccan politics, numerous challenges continue to impede their full and effective participation. These challenges are multifaceted, encompassing cultural, socio-economic, and institutional barriers that collectively create a complex environment for women seeking to engage in political life. This chapter explores these challenges in depth, analyzing the factors

that contribute to the ongoing marginalization of women in Moroccan politics.

### **(A) Cultural Barriers**

Cultural norms and deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes remain some of the most significant obstacles to women's political participation in Morocco. Traditional gender roles, which emphasize women's responsibilities within the family and the domestic sphere, often discourage women from pursuing careers in politics. In many cases, societal expectations dictate that women should prioritize their roles as mothers and wives over any public or professional aspirations (Ennaji & Sadiqi, 2011).

These cultural barriers are reinforced by societal attitudes that view politics as a male domain. Women who seek to enter the political arena often face skepticism or outright opposition, both from within their communities and from the broader public. This resistance is particularly strong in rural areas, where traditional values are more deeply ingrained, and where women's political engagement is often viewed as inappropriate or even shameful (Salime, 2011).

Moreover, the media in Morocco often perpetuates gender stereotypes, portraying female politicians in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles. Women in politics are frequently judged based on their appearance or their ability to balance family responsibilities, rather than on their political competencies or achievements. This type of coverage not only undermines the legitimacy of women in politics but also discourages other women from pursuing similar paths (Salime, 2011).

### **(B) Socio-Economic Barriers**

Socio-economic factors also play a critical role in limiting women's political participation in Morocco. Women, particularly those in rural areas, often face significant economic hardships that limit their ability to engage in politics. Economic dependency on male family members, combined with lower levels of education and limited access to resources, makes it difficult for women to pursue political careers (Verme, 2014).

The gender gap in education is another major barrier. Although Morocco has made progress in improving access to education for girls, disparities remain, especially in rural areas where educational attainment for women is often low. Without the necessary educational background, many women lack the skills and knowledge required to participate effectively in politics. Additionally, women who are economically disadvantaged are less likely to have the financial resources needed to run for office or to sustain a political career (Lahcen, 2021).

Furthermore, the burden of unpaid care work, which disproportionately falls on women, limits



their time and energy to engage in political activities. The dual responsibilities of managing a household and pursuing a political career can be overwhelming, particularly in a society where support systems for working mothers are limited. This imbalance in the distribution of domestic labor further exacerbates the challenges women face in accessing political opportunities (Lahcen, 2021).

### **(C) Institutional Barriers**

While legal frameworks and institutional support are essential for promoting women's political participation, these same institutions can also act as barriers when they are not fully committed to gender equality. In Morocco, political parties are the primary gatekeepers to political office, and their internal dynamics significantly influence the prospects for women's participation.

Despite the introduction of quotas and other measures designed to increase the representation of women, political parties in Morocco remain overwhelmingly male-dominated. Women within these parties often struggle to rise to leadership positions, as internal party politics are frequently shaped by male networks and alliances that exclude women from key decision-making processes (Karam, 1998).

Moreover, even when women do secure positions within political parties, they may be relegated to less influential roles or given portfolios that are traditionally associated with women's issues, such as family or social affairs, rather than positions that involve broader policy areas like finance or foreign affairs. This type of gendered assignment of roles reinforces stereotypes and limits the impact that women can have within the political sphere (Tripp, 2013).

Another institutional barrier is the lack of gender-sensitive policies and practices within political institutions themselves. Many institutions in Morocco do not have the necessary frameworks in place to support women's participation, such as measures to prevent harassment or to accommodate the needs of women balancing political careers with family responsibilities. Without these supports, women may find it difficult to remain in politics or to exercise their roles effectively (Krook, 2009).

### **(D) Political Environment and Harassment**

The political environment in Morocco can also be hostile to women, with harassment and discrimination being significant issues that deter women from participating in politics. Women who enter politics often face sexism and misogyny from male colleagues, opponents, and even the public. This harassment can take many forms, from derogatory comments and social media attacks to more serious threats of violence (Darhour & Dahlerup, 2013).

Such hostile environments not only discourage women from pursuing political careers but also limit the effectiveness of those who do. Women in politics may find themselves under constant scrutiny and pressure, which can undermine their confidence and ability to perform their duties. Furthermore, the lack of adequate legal protections and mechanisms to address harassment and discrimination in politics exacerbates these challenges, leaving women with little recourse (Darhour & Dahlerup, 2013).

Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to change the political culture in Morocco. This includes the implementation of stronger legal protections against harassment and discrimination, as well as efforts to raise awareness and challenge the sexist attitudes that contribute to the hostile environment women face in politics (Tripp, 2013).

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The political participation of women in Morocco has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades, driven by a combination of legal reforms, societal shifts, and the persistent efforts of women's movements. However, despite the progress made, the journey toward full gender parity in the political arena remains incomplete. The challenges that women face in achieving meaningful political participation are deeply entrenched and multifaceted, encompassing cultural, socio-economic, and institutional barriers that continue to hinder their progress.

### **(A) Legal Reforms and Their Limitations:**

Morocco's legal framework, particularly the introduction of the quota system and the 2011 Constitution, has played a pivotal role in increasing the numerical representation of women in politics. These reforms have opened doors for women to enter the political sphere, providing them with opportunities that were previously inaccessible. However, while these legal measures have succeeded in enhancing women's visibility in politics, they have not fully addressed the structural inequalities that limit their influence and decision-making power. The quota system, though necessary, has often resulted in tokenistic inclusion, where women are present but not necessarily empowered to shape policies or drive change.

### **(B) Cultural and Socio-Economic Barriers:**

Cultural norms and traditional gender roles continue to pose significant challenges to women's political participation. In many parts of Morocco, particularly in rural areas, societal expectations prioritize women's roles within the family, discouraging them from pursuing public or professional aspirations. These cultural barriers are further exacerbated by socio-

economic factors, such as economic dependency and limited access to education, which disproportionately affect women and restrict their ability to engage in politics. The persistent gender gap in education and the burden of unpaid care work place additional constraints on women, limiting their time, resources, and opportunities to participate in political life.

### **(C) Institutional and Political Challenges:**

Within political institutions, women often face additional hurdles, including exclusion from leadership positions and decision-making processes. The male-dominated nature of political parties and the lack of gender-sensitive policies within these institutions further marginalize women, relegating them to less influential roles. Moreover, the political environment in Morocco can be hostile to women, with harassment and discrimination being significant deterrents to their full participation. Without stronger legal protections and efforts to change the political culture, these challenges will continue to undermine the progress made through legal reforms.

### **(D) The Path Forward:**

To achieve true gender parity in Moroccan politics, a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach is needed. Legal reforms must be accompanied by efforts to dismantle the cultural and socio-economic barriers that limit women's political engagement. This includes promoting gender equality in education, addressing economic disparities, and challenging traditional gender roles that confine women to the private sphere. Political parties must also play a more proactive role in promoting gender equality within their ranks, ensuring that women are not only represented but also empowered to lead and influence policy decisions.

Furthermore, it is essential to create a political environment that is safe and supportive for women. This requires implementing stronger legal protections against harassment and discrimination, as well as fostering a political culture that values and respects the contributions of women. By addressing these challenges holistically, Morocco can move beyond mere representation and toward substantive participation, where women are fully integrated into the political process and have the power to shape the future of their country.

The political participation of women in Morocco is not just a matter of equity or justice; it is a fundamental aspect of a healthy and functioning democracy. The inclusion of women in politics enriches the democratic process, bringing diverse perspectives and experiences to the table and leading to more comprehensive and inclusive policy-making. As Morocco continues its journey toward greater gender equality, it must remain vigilant in addressing the barriers that still stand in the way of women's full participation in political life. Only by doing so can the country

realize the full potential of its democratic institutions and ensure that the voices of all its citizens are heard and respected.

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