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Yasmine Berriane

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## Women's Political Participation in the Middle East

Yasmine Berriane

### Introduction

In April 2019 a photograph of Alaa Salah, a Sudanese engineering and architecture student, filled the news. With a white cotton cloth wrapped around her body she was standing on the roof of a car chanting revolutionary poems in front of a predominantly female crowd. This image quickly became the symbol of the protests that have shaken Sudan in 2019, leading to the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir. The picture of Alaa Salah, but also the large number of women actively participating in the demonstrations, were met with surprise. The reaction was similar to that triggered a few years earlier, in 2011, by the number of women participating in the protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya.

As highlighted by Wanda Krause (2012, 2), this surprise stems from the general assumption that in the Middle East “men play a role in public and women, too repressed, cannot.” This assumption is based, first, on women’s quantifiable underrepresentation in formal political institutions such as parliaments, parties and government institutions: in the Middle East women’s political participation is amongst the lowest in the world. Second, it is based on the many social, political and legal obstacles that hinder or restrict women’s access to the public space, and therefore their involvement in political life. As Nesrine Malik (2019) notes, Alaa Salah’s picture obscures the fact that “this kind of woman is the exception, rather than the norm” in Sudan and many other countries of the region, where women involved in the uprisings “are being harassed, fondled and sexually shamed.” Finally, the idea that women do not participate in political life in the region is based on classic but still predominating definitions of political and social life that assume the existence of a radical separation between the private and the public, and that enclose political life in the public sphere. For this reason, as women are generally associated with private and domestic spaces, their actions are often deemed apolitical.

Yet, as illustrated by the Sudanese case above, women have been very active in the uprisings that have shaken most of the Middle East since 2011, leading to a shift from the image of the “passive, oppressed” woman to “a portrait of a proactive, more resilient Arab woman” (Shalaby 2016a, 171). This shift has renewed scholars’ interest in women’s political participation in the region, contributing to further developing an already rich body of research that has grown since the 1980s (Joseph 1986; Mernissi 1987; Sullivan 1986). In recent years (particularly post-2011), authors have been mainly interested in understanding the paradox that characterizes women’s political participation in the Middle East: the combination of both their absence and their presence as political actors (Khalil 2014; Morsy 2014; Sorbera 2014).

Building on a review of the literature combined with ethnographic research, this chapter concentrates first on women’s participation in formal political institutions to show how they are underrepresented in decision-making and political leadership positions throughout the Middle East. It also shows how this general statement needs to be nuanced, as it obscures substantial differences both within and among different states. The second section focuses on the variable and often ambivalent impact of gender quotas that were introduced in the 2000’s. The third section concentrates on the challenges to women’s participation in formal political institutions, as identified by scholars. The fourth and last section moves the focus from formal to informal spaces of politics. It shows that women’s underrepresentation in formal politics does not mean that they do not participate, but rather that they participate in alternative spaces. For a full picture of their political participation in the Middle East it is particularly important to consider the interactive dynamics that are observable between formal and informal politics. For this reason, the way political participation is understood is very broad here, including participation in institutions such as parliamentary and government institutions as well as associational and informal participation such as the work of grassroots organizations offering social services, the role of female brokers during electoral periods, and everyday life in local neighborhoods and families.

## **Women in Formal Political Institutions and Elected Offices**

Women's political participation is one of the issues that best illustrate the multiple paradoxes that women in Middle Eastern countries face. As highlighted by Elham Manea (2011), many states in the region gave women the right to participate fully in political life as soon as they had gained independence from colonial rule: Syria was the first to do this in 1949, followed by Lebanon (1952), Egypt (1956), Tunisia (1959), Algeria (1962), Morocco (1963), Libya (1964), Sudan (1964) and South Yemen (1967). But in practice, women were not able to participate in formal politics for a long time. While important changes can be noticed since 2000s, women remain largely underrepresented in parliaments, governments and political parties.

### *Women in Formal Political Institutions Before 2000s*

In 1997, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), which ranks world regions according to the percentage of women in the lower or single house of their parliament, ranked the Middle Eastern states last, with an average of only 3.7 percent women in their parliaments. In Morocco the rate was lower than 1 percent until 2002; in Jordan it was 1.3 percent; in Egypt 2 percent, in Algeria 3.4 percent, and in Mauritania, 3.8 percent. At the municipal level, the percentages were a little higher, but remained very low (IPU 1997). At the level of executive decision-making positions in political parties, ministries, and high government positions, they were almost absent.

In the countries of the Arabian Peninsula women were completely absent from formal politics before the 2000s, allowed neither to vote nor to run for elections. When Qatar granted women the right to participate in elections in 1999, none of the six women candidates running for a seat in the municipal council that year were elected, "but the fact that women were voters and candidates was a first" amongst the Gulf Cooperation Council's states (al-Sabah 2013, 48). In Kuwait, women's participation in politics was prohibited until 2005 by a 1963 electoral law, while in Saudi Arabia women were not allowed into politics until 2013 (al-Sabah 2013, 46–49).

These figures are often used to argue that the level of women's political participation in the region is very low. However, this misrepresents the situation. For example, even before 2000, there were some important variations across countries, such as in Tunisia and Iraq. In Tunisia, women's participation in parliament rose from 7.4 percent in 1997 to 11.5 percent in 1999. In Iraq, Saddam

Hussein appointed women to ministerial positions and his parliament was 7.6 percent female in 2000 (IPU 2000).

### *Women's Participation in Formal Politics since 2000s*

According to the IPU ranking in 2018, the Middle East remains a region with one of the lowest levels of female political participation in the world. It is also the region with the highest increase of female political participation. The Middle East is now ranked second to last, with an average of a little less than 19 percent of women representatives in parliament (IPU 2018). In the past two decades, the number of women standing as candidates has grown, and the number of women elected to parliament has made a huge leap forward in almost all the countries of the region.

Underlying this general trend are wide variations across countries. In October 2018, at the very top of the list, Tunisia and Sudan are forty-second and forty-seventh in the IPU rankings, with women making up more than 30 percent of their National Assemblies. At the opposite end of the ranking, women in Lebanon, Kuwait, Oman and Yemen make up less than 5 percent of representation. Between these two extremes are a wide variety of cases ranging from over 20 percent in countries such as Algeria, the United Arab Emirates and Morocco; between 10 and 20 percent in Libya, Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia; and less than 10 percent in Qatar, and Bahrain (IPU 2018). A greater local than national increase has also been noticed, in municipal councils for example where “campaigning efforts and/or quotas” have proven “more effective at ensuring women enter decision-making positions” (Zaatari 2013, 9). Thus, rather than ranking the level of formal political participation it is important to be aware of the disparities between and within countries.

### **More Female Representation but with Limited Participation**

This general increase in the number of women in government is the result of a variety of historical, social and political factors, one of which is the policies of affirmative action introduced to promote women's political participation since the beginning of the 2000s. Against the backdrop of the global diffusion of gender quotas (Dahlerup 2008), measures guaranteeing a minimum representation of women in political offices via reserved seats, party quotas and legislative quotas are also spreading in

the region. The ambivalent impact of these measures on Middle eastern societies is a controversial topic and the source of much debate within the literature.

Supporters of gender quota policies argue that these equality policy measures are one of the “surest ways” (Moghadam 2009, 25) of overcoming structural and cultural obstacles to women’s political representation in the Middle East (see also Beydoun 2010). In Morocco and Jordan, a number of seats were reserved for women in 2002 and 2003 respectively (Bozena 2010, 5). In both countries the number gradually rose with amendments to electoral law, and in 2018 it stands at 15.5 percent in Jordan and 20.5 percent in Morocco (IPU 2018). Iraq’s 2004 electoral law aimed for 25 percent female political representation in the National Assembly (Dahlerup, and Nordlund 2004, 96). In Mauritania, quotas for women were first introduced by decree before the 2006 elections, and that year the proportion of women in government rose from less than four percent to 22.1 percent. In 2008, Sudan’s electoral law was also amended with the introduction of a list reserved for women, guaranteeing female representation of at least 25 percent. In Algeria political parties adopted quotas to ensure at least 30 percent of candidates in 2012 were women. In the same year gender quotas were also introduced in Libya, where before the 2011 uprisings women had 7.7 percent of the seats in the General People’s Congress; this rose to 16.5 percent of the newly-elected National Congress. In Saudi Arabia the King appointed 30 women, in 2013, to the *Shura* Council and today, women constitute 19.8 percent of this Council.

The 2011 uprisings contributed to the gradual extension of these affirmative action policies by opening up debate about the need to draft new constitutions and issue new electoral laws. Consequently, gender quotas were either increased, as in Tunisia and Morocco, or newly introduced, as in Libya. In post-2011 Tunisia, women’s groups used the transitional period to push for equal citizenship (Shalaby 2016a). The principle of gender parity in political life was codified by the new Constitution of 2014 with a clause introduced in electoral law enabling the election of 68 women to the Tunisian Assembly (Shalaby 2016a).

The Arab Spring uprisings in 2010–11 did not have the same effect everywhere in the region, however. In Egypt the 2011 revolution produced little change, despite women’s active and visible

participation in mass demonstrations, and later in elections (Shalaby 2016a). A reserved-seat system, introduced prior to the 2010 elections, led to an increase in female representation in Parliament from 2 percent to 12.7 percent, but this was abandoned after the fall of Mubarak in 2011. In 2012 women made up only 2 percent of the first post-revolutionary parliament in Egypt with just three female ministers (Sorbera 2014).

Despite the disparities between countries, women now have a greater presence in parliamentary institutions in all the countries that have applied gender quotas. Where such measures have not been introduced, their representation in parliaments remains very low, as in Lebanon, where despite many efforts by women's movements no quota measures have been introduced. However, as in other regions of the world the impact of gender quotas remains unclear. Their introduction seems to have had only a marginal impact on producing deep social and political change, in the form of a "sustainable representation of women" (Darhour, and Dahlerup 2013).

First, the increasing number of women in parliamentary institutions obscures subnational disparities, which remain under-researched. The trends described above primarily involve urban, educated middle-class women with close links to the established and dominant political elites. In the broad category of women, important regional, ethnic and class divides remain; for example, rural women, working-class women, and the women of marginalized ethnic or religious groups are still largely underrepresented.

Second, quantifiable improvements in women's political participation still intimately depend upon affirmative action policies. In contexts where gender quotas have been introduced and then removed, the number of women elected to parliament has fallen drastically. This is illustrated by the Egyptian case described earlier.

Third, the issue of women's political participation cannot be isolated from the broader political and social processes with which this issue is interrelated, including power relations in parliament, political parties and ministries. In some contexts, social and political factors have reduced the impact of gender quota provisions. In Tunisia, for example, where a parity system was introduced, "existing electoral laws coupled with the ideological politicization across the country and the fragmentation of

the political party system have limited the success of the constitutional provisions,” (Shalaby 2016a, 176–77) and the results of the 2014 elections did not achieve the gender parity newly-introduced by the constitution.

Moreover, while gender quotas enable women in the Middle East to be represented in formal politics, they also tend to contribute to the reproduction of power hierarchies at all levels. Gender quota policies are among the “least politically costly and most cosmetic way(s) to show a commitment to democratic development.” (Bozena 2010, 9). At the same time, they reproduce and reinforce stereotyped gender roles and pre-existing patriarchal norms as well as autocratic forms of rule (Abou-Zaid 2006; Goulding 2009; Sabbagh 2007). They can enable established political elites to remain in power by building new alliances (Sater 2007), and by reinforcing clientelist networks (Lidell 2009), while tokenizing female politicians (Sabbagh 2007).

We still know very little about the negotiation of gender relations or the roles played by women in political institutions, but some studies have shown that once elected, women tend to face important restrictions and limitations. They are often excluded from “general interest positions of authority” and remain confined to women’s issues (Roussillon 2009) or more accurately, “issues assumed to be consistent with traditional gender roles” (Zaatari 2013, 9). Women remain almost absent from leadership positions within political institutions and rarely head electoral lists. Those appointed to head executive institutions such as ministries or state secretariats for example remain the exception, and their number has not necessarily followed the increase in elected women representatives. In Morocco, for instance, the number of female ministers decreased from seven to one after the 2011 elections although the quota for the elections had been extended to 17 percent (Darhour, and Dahlerup 2013). At the local level, the increase in the number of women after the Moroccan 2015 elections was accompanied by the decline in the number of female presidents of regions and municipalities.

### **Legal, Social, and Political Obstacles to Women’s Participation**

Scholars have tried to identify the obstacles and point out factors that can explain this persistent gender gap in political life. I focus here on the most frequently cited obstacles to women’s political participation in the Middle East.



### *Social Norms and Gender Stereotypes*

The first factor identified in the literature concerns dominant representations that ascribe political qualities and public competence mainly to men. According to the Arab Barometer survey, the majority of people in the Middle East (67.4 percent in 2016) see men as better at political leadership than women, a view that has remained largely unchanged over the last decade (Robbins and Thomas 2018). Whereas men are considered naturally suited to political office, women are perceived as naturally lacking the desired qualities. In Middle Eastern societies women are mainly associated with the roles of mother and caretaker, a discourse intimately linked to the construction of modern nation states in the Middle East: “The elevation of the role of motherhood to the realm of sanctity seems to capture women within the domain of the domestic and thus patriarchy (under traditional conceptions of patriarchy)” (Zaatari 2006, 36). Thus, women tend to drop out of political life or their political trajectory is slowed down when they face the double burden of managing domestic and political life.

The motherhood discourse (Zaatari 2006) is also used to justify the confinement of elected female representatives to women’s issues and their exclusion from late meetings, which are deemed incompatible with their role as family caretakers. Even in countries where women’s access to public and gender mixed spaces is not restricted by law, social norms tend to limit their access to certain spaces that play a central role in politics such as mixed-gender meetings and electoral get-togethers in public cafés (Sater 2007). The dominant idea that politicians are corrupt is also put forward to justify women’s absence from the “dirty game” of politics (Zaatari 2013, 11), protecting their reputation from being tarnished.

These dominant representations about women’s roles in society are not, however, sufficient to understand their limited political participation. Depending on the context, references to women’s role as mothers can also become an avenue of civil participation (Zaatari 2006). In Lebanon, where women’s participation in formal politics is very low, both men and women show more support for women in politics than in countries like Morocco, where the number of women elected to parliament has gradually increased since 2002 (Abdul-Latif and Serpe 2010). Paradoxically, while the number of women

participating in formal politics is generally growing, the interest of both women and men in politics seems to be declining (Robbins and Thomas 2018).

### *Laws and Legal Frameworks*

To understand women's difficulties accessing political office one must also take into consideration the legal pluralism that predominates in Middle Eastern societies. While most constitutions grant women the same political rights as men, they coexist with legislations that are often based on interpretations of religious and customary traditions and do not grant women equal rights in other domains of social life. Personal status codes, family law, and criminal and labor laws in certain cases, are based on the idea of fundamental differences between men and women and do not grant women the same rights and responsibilities as men. In most of the Middle East these laws regulate the gender hierarchy within the family, the share of women's inheritance, the way they should dress in public, the spaces in which they are allowed to move freely, and the forms of public expression they can use.

As highlighted by Zeina Zaatari (2013, 13), "all rights are interconnected:" Discriminatory laws that regulate the status of individuals in society, and power relations in families have a direct effect on women's access to the public sphere and their ability to be politically active. Discriminatory inheritance laws, for instance, limit their access to material resources and thus to the financial means needed for a political campaign. Their subordinate role in the family can restrict their freedom of movement. In some Middle Eastern countries, paradoxically while "a woman may have the right to be elected to Parliament or be chosen as a minister in a government cabinet, (...) this very parliamentarian or minister may not be allowed to travel outside the country with a government delegation if her husband withholds his permission" (Manea 2011, 7).

### *Politics of Authoritarianism and Gendered Political Violence*

Another set of factors has to do with the political regimes in place, or more particularly the impact of "politics of authoritarianism" (Manea 2011; Shalaby 2016b, 46) on women's political participation. In the Middle East, various forms of authoritarian rule prevail (Bellin 2012; Hinnebusch 2006). Post-independence regimes in the region were built around strong leaders, who gradually concentrated the political power in their hands by repressing or tightly controlling and coopting oppositional groups and

parties. Between the 1960's and 1970's this repression was primarily directed against leftist groups and parties, and later also against Islamists. As Alain Roussillon (2009) notes, women who were socialized during that period were repressed and politically marginalized, slowing the emergence of a new generation of female political actors.

In constrained political contexts, political participation and access to political office are limited for both men and women. However, women face some specific forms of limitation. Several post-independence regimes – and also their oppositions – strategically supported initiatives that advanced women's rights in the region, leaving little space for alternative initiatives and actors (Badran 2000). In an attempt to “women rights wash” (Le Renard 2020, 226) its image abroad after the 9/11 attacks, the Saudi-Arabian monarchy introduced some limited reforms including the appointment of one woman to the government in 2009 and thirty to the Consultative Shura Council in 2013. These reforms contrast with the arrests and detention of women right's activists in 2018, immediately after Mohammad bin Salman, the Crown Prince and Deputy Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia, gave women the right to drive. Similarly, in Tunisia the promotion of women's rights, encouraged by Bourguiba and later by Ben Ali, was largely aimed at improving the country's international image and diverting attention from its internal political repression of the opposition (Bessis 1999). In Iraq the *Ba' th* party promoted women's rights as a strategy to weaken the opposition and attract broader social support (al-Sabah 2013; Joseph 1991).

The role played by first ladies is central in shaping these top-down gender politics. By re-appropriating gender discourses and staging themselves as the main promoters of feminist agendas in the country, they have contributed to undermining the work of women's movements and the emergence of alternative female political elites. One of the most cited examples is Suzanne Mubarak who was celebrated by the Mubarak regime as “the foremost champion of women's rights” in Egypt (Elsadda 2011, 93). She headed the National Council for Women and was staged as the main actor behind reforms aimed at improving the legal position of women in the country, leaving little visibility to the efforts deployed by women's rights activists (Hatem 2016). Ironically, women's rights activists were perceived by the general public as being associated with Suzanne Mubarak and faced therefore much hostility and violence during the uprisings of 2011 (Elsadda 2011).

When their husbands came into power in the late 1990s and beginning of 2000s, first ladies such as Queen Rania in Jordan, Asma al-Assad in Syria and Princess Salma in Morocco incarnated the new Arab woman that symbolized a break with past practices and an opening up to liberal norms. These liberal norms contributed to reinforcing the international legitimacy of the new leaders (Ossman 2007; Sukarieh 2015). In addition, their active involvement in the state-sponsored NGO sector, participated “in introducing new, neoliberal forms of governance that many argue are deeply disempowering of women (and men) in their countries, but also turn out to be directly promoting traditional forms of women’s status and work in the region.” (Sukarieh 2015, 584)

After the 1990’s, authoritarian regimes introduced liberal reforms in a number of Middle Eastern states as they adapted to pressures for political change. The uprisings that shook the region in 2011 contributed to the fall of a number of these regimes and to political reforms, but these changes did not deeply transform the power relations in the region’s states. During the uprisings political violence against women participating in demonstrations became a widely discussed and controversial issue. Sexual assaults, legitimations of rape, and other forms of violent action were specifically used to target women demonstrators, as if to discipline them for transgressing the gender boundaries and intruding into (male) public and political space (Hafez 2016). In several post-2011 contexts, being a female politician has become risky and dangerous. In Libya, for example, women engaging with politics were subject to physical and sexual violence both before and after the uprisings that led to the fall of the Qaddafi regime in 2011. Women politicians are particularly targeted, and face threats of rape, kidnapping and murder (Langhi 2014). In several of today’s transitory and conflictual Middle Eastern regimes fear has become a key factor in women’s limited political participation.

### *Political Parties and the Secret Gardens of Nomination*

Political parties are one of the main avenues for political participation in the Middle East. There is still much that we do not know about the situation of women in these political entities. Not only are political parties in the region under-researched but most of the few studies that do analyze these institutions ignore the role of women within them. The literature shows that the way power relations are organized in parties, the absence of measures to ensure gender equality and the prevalence of partisan clientelist

networks contribute to limiting women's participation in formal politics (Beydoun 2010; Bouasria 2016; Lidell 2009; Karam 2000). These trends appear to apply, with rare exceptions, in all political parties regardless of their ideological affiliations.

Political parties that do have programs for the promotion of women in both society and the internal party structure are rare in the Middle East. At the level of political recruitment, for example, there are no measures specifically targeting women, particularly women from underrepresented social categories. The focus lies mainly on women of upper- and middle-class urban elites with family links to male members of the party, and with connections to a broader patronage machine. Women in political parties therefore often face difficulties building broad coalitions. Their activities are generally confined to the parties' women's branches, which emerged at an early stage in the parties' history and whose main tasks remain the recruitment of women and mobilization of female voters and have little internal power or capacity to affect party decisions.

At election times it becomes clear that party gatekeepers generally prefer male candidates. Even in contexts where gender quotas are imposed by state legislation, the way electoral lists are constituted can still contribute to promoting male candidates by positioning them, for example, at the top of the electoral list or strategically placing female candidates in constituencies where the party is expected to fail (Bouasria 2016; Shalaby 2016a). In Saudi Arabia, where women were allowed to run in the municipal elections of 2015 for the first time, the female candidates remained faceless as their photographs were not included on the electoral lists, unlike those of the males. Once nominated, lack of campaign management skills, political experience, and financial support have proven decisive in limiting women's chances to be elected. Once elected, female politicians, and particularly quota-women, are rarely chosen for commissions dealing with issues of general interest. They are generally confined to women's issues (Abou-Zeid 2006).

The rise of Islamist parties after 2011 is often brought forward as a reason for women's limited access to political participation. Many Islamist movements have been the most vocal against the reform of women's rights in the region. Before the 1990s female Islamist activists were hardly visible. After they came to power in 2011 the Islamist parties in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt initiated constitutional

changes against the principle of gender equality. Scholars have shown that Islamist parties do not necessarily have more restrictive internal policies than secular parties, and that women's political activism in Islamist movements and parties is a growing phenomenon (Abdellatif, and Ottaway 2007; Yafout 2015). In many cases they even show that the number of women's activists in their ranks and highest decision-making bodies, as well as of female candidates and elected representatives, outstrips their secular counterparts in countries such as Tunisia, Turkey, Yemen, Morocco, and Jordan (Clark, and Schwedler 2003; Tajali 2016). This trend was further reinforced when Islamist parties came into power after 2011. Despite continuing internal opposition to women's political participation, the number of elected female representatives from Islamist parties increased substantially, while a gradual ideological shift in support of women in politics has been observed (Tajali 2016; Yafout 2015).

One leading explanation points to the Islamist movements' attention to outreach, especially in contexts where they faced state repression and had to develop their activities underground within mosques, and local neighborhoods, offering literacy classes, religious education, and charitable work. As key intermediaries active at the local level, women have played a central role in these outreach activities that have enabled Islamist movements to spread their political message and build strong organizations from the bottom up. Women continued to play a central role in electoral campaigns when their movements faced the possibility of becoming political parties and participating in the legal political process (Abdellatif and Ottaway 2007). Female activists who were facing strong opposition in their party pushed for change. They used their central role as key intermediaries and seized "opportunities created by internal party tensions," as illustrated by Clark and Schwedler (2003, 308) in their study of Islamist parties in Jordan and Yemen.

### **Alternative Spaces of Political Participation**

Despite the substantial changes over the past two decades women are still poorly represented in formal political institutions in the Middle East. Limiting an analysis to these institutions would, however, give a very reductionist vision of their political participation, obscuring women's involvement in alternative and mainly informal spaces of political participation, as illustrated by their absence from official historiographies despite their active participation in key struggles in the region's history. Judith Tucker

(1986) shows how women played a visible, although insufficiently documented, role in informal political movements in early nineteenth century Egypt. It is only with the gradual formalization and regulation of politics during the nineteenth century that “women, along with other disadvantaged groups, appeared to move to the margins of political life” (Tucker 1986, 10). Women were also actively involved in struggles for independence, taking part in nationalist movements and armed resistance to colonial occupation (Baker 1998), and later in movements opposing the newly established postcolonial regimes. The most recent uprisings in the Middle East contributed to making women’s participation in past struggles more visible: in Algeria for example, women’s contribution to the anti-colonial struggle was recently highly mediatized through the participation in anti-regime demonstrations in 2019 of activists such as Djamila Bouhired, a former member of the nationalist struggle against French colonial rule.

Studying political participation via informal spaces of participation is not a new trend. Several generations of scholars have shown that “the domestic sphere is a lively arena of social, political and economic action in the Middle East” (Joseph 1986, 4). Shifting the focus to alternative spaces of participation, however, has gained new momentum since the 2011 uprisings. Women’s newly gained visibility during the protests prompted researchers to look more closely at the spaces in which women were politically active before the uprisings, how they participated in the latter and how these forms of participation contributed to redefining politics in the region. Shifting the focus from formal to informal politics does not mean that there is no dynamic interaction between the two. On the contrary, through their involvement in alternative political spaces women can “recapture the formal through the informal,” (Sorbera 2014, 160; see also Joseph 1997a) as illustrated below.

### *Women’s Organizations*

According to Roussillon (2009), women’s organizations are the “sole political outlets conceded to women” by the state. They are also among the alternative spaces of political participation that have attracted most scholarly attention (see for instance Chatty, and Rabo 1997; Jad 2004; Moghadam 2007). The first women’s organizations appeared as early as the late nineteenth century among the upper bourgeoisie and were followed by a second generation of organizations that developed against the

backdrop of the launch of the UN Decade for Women in 1975. Since the early 1980s, in response to their marginalization in political parties and limited access to political decision-making positions since independence, women have shifted their attention towards the creation of non-governmental organizations through which they are able to push forward their demands in terms of women's rights. These organizations developed first within leftist and secularist groups, followed by Islamist women's organizations (Krause 2012).

Women's organizations have been criticized for their elitist character and their tendency to be controlled and coopted by state institutions (Roussillon 2009). It has further been shown that they can contribute to the reproduction of social systems of domination, such as systems of patronage and clientelism (Joseph 1997b). The spread of women's NGOs in the Middle East hinders the formation of strong women's movements, according to Jad (2004). At the same time, they have been instrumental in pressing for reforms, not only by promoting the reform of discriminatory laws but also by demanding increased gender quotas in formal political institutions. They have contributed to the feminization of formal politics by providing a pool of potential female candidates who have acquired political experience via their engagement in women's organizations, and by offering training and support for female political candidates.

In Morocco, for instance, women's organizations have campaigned in favor of a gender quota since the 1990s. In Saudi Arabia, where women were not allowed to organize themselves into political organizations, informal but organized women's networks formed by intellectuals such as Hatoon al Fassi lobbied in favor of women's right to vote. They supported, for instance, the female candidates who ran during the 2005 communal elections, despite women still being excluded from the electoral process at the time. In 2018, Hatoon al Fassi and other women leaders were imprisoned for their activism. In Libya prior to the 2012 elections, women's organizations such as the Libyan Women's Platform for Peace pushed for the introduction of a gender quota in electoral law, stipulating that all political parties should alternate both vertically and horizontally between male and female candidates in their political lists (Langhi 2014). After the regime change in 2011 women's organizations were particularly vocal and active in Tunisia and Egypt in reaction to Islamist parties' opposition to gender equality. They also actively participated in preparing women candidates for the next elections.



### *Spaces of Renewed Political Participation*

Women's organizations that developed from the early 1980s were mainly led by elites. This trend has been counter-balanced by recent transformations such as the development and diversification of the associational sphere and the NGO sector throughout the Middle East (Ben Nefissa 2002), in a context of global contemporary development politics promoting the diffusion of participatory approaches. More particularly, the number of local NGOs and local development associations aimed at developing underprivileged city neighborhoods and under-equipped villages in the countryside has grown. These small, locally based and formally apolitical organizations specialize in social, developmental and educational issues, and target mainly women and young people.

Women play a key role in creating these associations and developing their activities, often with the support of international organizations or state institutions. This trend is a clear continuation of what Islah Jad refers to as the "NGOization of the Arab women's movement" (2004, 38), increasingly fragmenting and weakening women's movements in the region. At the same time, the proliferation of small-scale women's associations has also helped to open the participatory space up to new social categories, as these organizations could not have developed without the participation of female working-class and rural brokers and intermediaries. Thus, through the development of local associations, women who do not belong to the traditional local elite can acquire the necessary social and political resources to develop their own patronage networks and obtain state resources, and in this way, compete with the elites who have previously dominated the local political sphere (Berriane 2013). During local elections female representatives of local associations are being increasingly courted by political parties to help them fill their electoral lists and mobilize voters by running for a seat in the municipal council (Berriane 2015). Local associations have become new gateways to political positions for underrepresented women.

Recent uprisings and protest movements have also contributed to opening up new spaces of political activism for underrepresented categories of women. Since the uprisings of 2011, middle-class and ordinary women have used and staged their bodies in different ways to express political dissent (Salime 2015). Rural women have started organizing to demand equal access to resources such as tribal

land (Berriane 2016). Informal political groups have increasingly become a key instrument of political participation. Lucia Sorbera (2014) shows, for instance, how in post-2011 Egypt spontaneous political acts such as the Women Against Violence demonstration, loose web-based networks, and local worker's strikes have enabled women from various social and generational groups, including formerly underrepresented categories such as young girls and working-class women, to become politically active.

### *Everyday Politics and Domestic Spaces of Participation*

The clear distinction between private and public/political spaces obscures the key role of domestic spaces and informal politics in the making of political life, including formal political institutions. They particularly contribute to the fact that the political agency of the majority of ordinary women – especially those living in poverty – has long been ignored (Singerman 1995). It is crucial to recognize the political role of domestic and private spaces if a more accurate understanding of politics in the Middle East is to be reached.

Several key studies have developed this idea. In her research on heterogenous intersectorian women's networks in a working-class neighborhood of Greater Beirut, Suad Joseph (1983, 13–14) shows how women's house-to-house visits fulfilled key political roles such as “integrating new residents and stabilizing older residents; (...) airing disputes, rendering customary justice, and resolving local conflict.” Seemingly informal and apolitical networks in which women play a central role are also key to Diane Singerman's (1995) study of poor neighborhoods in Cairo, where networking activities contribute to political change by enabling survival strategies based on the distribution of goods and services, and cooperation between different individuals and groups. In her study of neighborhood life in Damascus, Friederike Stolleis (2004) illustrates the variety of political roles of women's reception days and informal saving associations. These apparently nonpolitical activities establish and maintain networks of social relations that participate in the government of day-to-day life in the neighborhood by exchanging information, enabling social control, and offering informal ways to cope with difficulties in a context in which basic social services are insufficient.

Such informal political activities can have a direct impact on the making of formal politics. This is the case, for instance, when female candidates campaign mainly through private gatherings, in homes,

and in front of women, as observed during the Moroccan municipal elections of 2009 (Berriane 2015). While such gatherings are “spatially private” they are “substantively public in intent and effect,” to borrow from Stacey Yadav’s (2010, 1) description of Islamist women’s activism in Yemen. They enable women who have difficulty accessing public and male-dominated spaces to receive information about the electoral process and the political campaign, while offering an arena in which they can express their concerns and demands to local candidates. In the informal, convivial and festive character of these meetings the political character of electoral campaigns gets blurred, which seems to attenuate potential antagonisms towards political candidates and creates an atmosphere that is much more conducive to the diffusion of political messages, the building of local alliances, and the (re)building of citizens’ trust in the political process.

## **Conclusion**

The available quantifiable data highlight one of the main characteristics of women’s political participation in the Middle East: their clear underrepresentation in formal politics. But the figures obscure three important dimensions: the ambiguous impact of gender quotas, national and subnational disparities, and the plurality of informal and often invisible activities and spaces in which women do participate.

Women are politically active in a variety of informal political spaces such as domestic spaces, grassroots movements, and digital spaces, and their participation has a direct impact on shaping formal politics. To truly grasp the scope and impact of their political participation in the Middle East it is therefore necessary to pay particular attention to the dynamic interrelation between formal and informal politics.

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