
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gendered Dynamics of Political Leadership: A Comparative Study of Morocco, the MENA Region, and Western Democracies

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| ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the intricate intersections of gender, power, and politics in Morocco and the broader Arab world through a feminist analytical framework. Adopting a comparative approach, it examines Moroccan women's participation in political leadership and decision-making processes. Morocco's national development strategy underscores the equitable inclusion of all citizens as a prerequisite for sustainable progress, positioning political participation at the core of this vision. Despite significant strides toward gender equality in the political sphere, further advancements remain essential to achieving substantive parity comparable to that of advanced Western democracies. Women's empowerment thus constitutes a pivotal factor in the consolidation of democracy, equality, and social justice. Although Morocco outperforms several MENA countries in terms of women's political representation, it continues to trail behind European and Scandinavian nations in realizing comprehensive gender parity.

| KEYWORDS

Feminism, Gender Parity, Gender Equality, Decision-Making, Power Dynamics, Human Development, Leadership, Democracy, Political Representation

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 15 October 2025

PUBLISHED: 01 November 2025

DOI: 10.32996/ljahs.2025.5.4.2

1. Introduction

Politics constitutes a foundational instrument for the exercise and consolidation of democracy, functioning not merely as a mechanism of governance but as a critical arena in which citizens articulate their rights, shape societal priorities, and exercise agency. For women, political engagement represents a key avenue for emancipation, enabling them to assert their interests, challenge entrenched patriarchal norms, and participate meaningfully in decisions that affect both public and private life.

The advancement of democratic principles and social rights is inextricably linked to the equitable inclusion of all citizens—regardless of gender—ensuring that governance structures and policy outcomes authentically reflect the diverse perspectives, experiences, and needs of society.

Since the emergence of the women's suffrage movement in the mid-nineteenth century, women have waged a sustained struggle to secure a recognized place within the political sphere alongside men. Initially focused on achieving the right to vote and participate in elections, this struggle has evolved into a broader pursuit of full political inclusion, encompassing

access to public office and the capacity to exercise substantive influence over legislation, policy formation, and executive decision-making.

Women's political mobilization has been shaped by both global and local forces. In Western contexts, the consolidation of women's rights was linked to successive waves of feminism, emphasizing legal equality, social justice, and participatory citizenship. Pioneering activists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Emmeline Pankhurst, and Simone de Beauvoir highlighted the necessity of combining formal legal reforms with cultural and institutional transformation to achieve genuine empowerment.

In non-Western societies, women's political engagement has often intersected with struggles for national independence, social reform, and post-colonial state-building, revealing how gendered power dynamics are embedded within broader socio-political structures. Feminist political theory underscores that descriptive representation alone is insufficient: factual empowerment requires that women not only occupy office but actively influence policy, challenge structural inequalities, and shape governance in ways that advance social justice and equality.

Consequently, women's political participation embodies a dual struggle: the quest for formal recognition and inclusion, and the pursuit of substantive influence over the mechanisms of power. Understanding this dual dimension is essential for analyzing contemporary political systems, particularly transitional democracies, where institutional reforms, cultural norms, and political agency interact to determine the extent to which women can realize their full political potential.

As Wagner (2019) notes, early suffragists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony laid the intellectual and political groundwork for subsequent generations of women in leadership, demonstrating that the global suffrage movement was a critical precursor to women's substantive participation in politics. Similarly, Paxton, Hughes, and Green (2006) emphasize that the extension of suffrage constituted the cornerstone of a worldwide movement enabling women to claim political power and assert agency within public institutions.

Political participation is widely recognized as a fundamental human right that must be guaranteed to all individuals (Steiner, 1988). In this regard, women's engagement in politics represents not only a legitimate entitlement but also a crucial mechanism for advancing their social standing, economic opportunities, and broader influence within society.

International frameworks reinforce this normative foundation: the United Nations' *Convention on the Political Rights of Women* (CPRW, 1952) affirms that all citizens are entitled to the full exercise of political rights irrespective of gender, while the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW, 1979) obliges state parties to actively promote women's participation in public life and to dismantle all forms of gender-based discrimination.

Despite the progress achieved through both international and domestic initiatives, women remain underrepresented in political institutions due to a constellation of structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. Historically, patriarchal systems have excluded women from the public sphere, particularly from positions of political authority.

Even when women attain office, they often face symbolic marginalization, restricted influence, and systemic obstacles that constrain their political efficacy. Women active in political life frequently confront multiple forms of gender-based discrimination, including harassment, exclusion from decision-making networks, and institutional practices that diminish their visibility and effectiveness.

This persistent marginalization has been insufficiently addressed in sociological and historical scholarship, which has traditionally reinforced perceptions of women as "second-class citizens" in contrast to men who occupy dominant political and social roles. Such hierarchical classifications are deeply embedded in patriarchy—an ideological system that imposes rigid boundaries between the sexes, positioning men as heads of households and arbiters of public life while relegating women to subordinate roles. Consequently, attempts to challenge these entrenched hierarchies often encounter resistance from institutions and actors committed to preserving male dominance and restricting women's social and political agency.

Persistent gender discrimination has profoundly shaped women's experiences across social, economic, and political domains. Enloe (2007), in *Globalization and Militarism: Feminists Make the Link*, underscores that gender relations are maintained through systems of segregation that delineate socially constructed boundaries between what is considered male and female, thereby reinforcing asymmetrical power structures.

These systems have historically excluded women from the political domain and constrained their capacity for public agency. Given that political participation represents one of the most effective means of advancing women's emancipation and contesting patriarchal authority, it remains central to contemporary debates on women's rights, gender justice, and the democratization of public life.

Building on this historical and theoretical foundation, the present study investigates the gendered dynamics of political leadership in Morocco, the broader MENA region, and selected Western democracies. Through a comparative lens, it explores how institutional mechanisms, cultural norms, and historical trajectories shape women's access to political office and their substantive influence within decision-making processes.

Morocco provides an especially instructive case, reflecting both the progress achieved through constitutional reforms and gender quotas, and the enduring challenges posed by entrenched patriarchal structures. By contrast, Western democracies—particularly the Nordic countries—offer models of more advanced gender parity, illustrating the interaction between legal frameworks, party-level initiatives, and socio-cultural norms in sustaining women's political empowerment. This comparative perspective facilitates a nuanced understanding of the conditions under which women's representation transcends numerical presence to become substantively transformative, illuminating both the potential and the limitations of gender equality reforms in diverse political contexts.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative approach to examine the gendered dimensions of political leadership in Morocco, the broader MENA region, and selected Western democracies. Grounded in feminist political theory, it employs a qualitative framework to assess the extent and nature of gender parity across these political systems.

The analysis is organized around three interrelated dimensions: (1) institutional mechanisms, including gender quotas, electoral laws, and constitutional provisions; (2) numerical representation, reflected in women's share of parliamentary and ministerial positions; and (3) substantive influence, evaluated through the policy domains and leadership roles in which women exert decision-making authority.

Primary data are derived from official reports and statistical databases published by the United Nations, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and national government institutions, ensuring both reliability and cross-country comparability. These are complemented by secondary academic sources—peer-reviewed journal articles, policy analyses, and monographs on gender and politics—which provide the theoretical and interpretative framework necessary for contextualizing the findings.

The study employs a hybrid methodological design that integrates interpretative and comparative analysis. Morocco serves as the principal case study, examined in relation to the broader MENA context and selected Western democracies to capture the diversity of institutional and socio-political arrangements shaping women's political participation.

The analysis triangulates quantitative indicators, qualitative insights, and institutional reports, thereby achieving both analytical breadth and interpretative depth. This multidimensional approach enables an evaluation that transcends descriptive statistics, illuminating the structural, institutional, and cultural determinants of women's substantive engagement in political leadership.

3. Literature Review

3-1. Women's Political Contributions in Western Societies: Principal Dimensions and Trends

3-1-1. Gender Equality and the Gender Gap

Since the emergence of first-wave feminism in the nineteenth century, women's status in Western societies has undergone profound transformation (Walters, 2005). Feminist movements have consistently positioned politics and gender equality at the core of their advocacy. The first women's convention, convened in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848, explicitly demanded equal rights for women alongside men, marking a decisive moment in the institutionalization of feminist political activism (Dumenil, 2012).

Among the key figures of this early movement was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a prominent American reformer and co-author of *History of Woman Suffrage*. This seminal six-volume work, produced between 1881 and 1922 in collaboration with Susan B. Anthony, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Ida Husted Harper, documented a transformative era in the struggle for women's political participation in the United States. It established women's suffrage as the cornerstone of early feminist activism and laid the intellectual and organizational foundation for subsequent waves of feminist mobilization aimed at advancing gender equality in both social and political domains.

In contemporary discourse, political participation remains a defining dimension of women's empowerment. As Alexander et al. (2017) observe, women's political empowerment has evolved into a global priority, shaping international policy agendas and influencing democratic governance worldwide. Their analysis underscores that empowered female citizens engage not only directly—through voting or holding office—but also indirectly, by shaping public opinion and influencing policy debates. Yet, gender-based discrimination continues to permeate both social and political institutions, generating a persistent gender gap that constrains women's political representation and performance. This enduring disparity reflects structural and cultural barriers that continue to restrict women's full integration into political life.

The gender gap is thus deeply intertwined with patterns of political participation. Although women in countries such as the United States obtained the right to vote as early as the 1920s, their substantive engagement in political leadership evolved only gradually over subsequent decades (Andersen, 1996; Burrell, 2004; Paxton et al., 2007). Historical and social constraints—including restrictive gender norms, limited access to political networks, and unequal resource distribution—have hindered women's advancement across various levels of governance (Pintor & Gratschew, 2002; Moghadam, 2003).

Even within advanced democracies, women's representation in the highest echelons of political power remains limited. Paxton et al. (2007) note that, despite the formal equality before the law, structural barriers persist in impeding women's access to executive leadership positions. Data from the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP, 2006) reveal that as of 2004, women held only 10 percent of gubernatorial offices in the United States. Such figures illustrate the persistent disparity between women's formal political rights and their substantive exercise of political power.

3-1-2. Gender Quotas in Germany and Ireland

Gender quotas have emerged as a key indicator of women's political participation in parliaments and state institutions across the globe. Davidson-Schmich (2006) examines the proportion of female politicians within German parties between 1990 and 2000, noting that despite Germany's advanced democratic and economic status, women continue to be underrepresented relative to men. This disparity, she argues, stems largely from enduring socio-cultural and religious factors—particularly in rural regions—that continue to constrain women's access to political power.

A similar pattern is evident in Ireland. Although the country has achieved important symbolic milestones—most notably the elections of Mary Robinson in 1990 and Mary McAleese in 1997 as the nation's first and second female presidents—and is frequently lauded for its feminist advocacy and legal commitment to gender equality, women remain numerically underrepresented in formal political institutions. Randal and Smyth (1987) observe that female political actors continue to constitute a minority within Irish political offices, a condition reinforced by the persistence of traditional gender norms, fundamentalist Catholic values, and institutionalized patriarchal structures.

Germany and Ireland illustrate two distinct approaches to the institutionalization of gender quotas in politics. In Germany, there is no legislated national quota; instead, women's political representation is promoted through intra-party mechanisms. While parties such as the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Greens have adopted binding internal quota systems, others—such as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)—apply more gradual or flexible measures, and some, including the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), have rejected quotas altogether. According to the *Bundeswahlleiterin* and *Deutsche Welle* (2025), these variations have contributed to stagnation in women's political participation within the Bundestag, where female representation remains below 32.4 percent in 2025.

In contrast, Ireland has pursued a legislated quota model since the enactment of the Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act of 2012. This legislation initially required political parties to nominate at least 30 percent female candidates, a threshold subsequently increased to 40 percent, with financial sanctions imposed on parties that fail to comply. The quota system has compelled Irish parties to expand the pool of female candidates, resulting in measurable gains in parliamentary representation. As of the 2024 *Dáil Éireann* elections, women held a record 25.3 percent of seats (NWCI, 2023; IPU, 2025).

While Ireland's legislated quota has produced steady and quantifiable improvements in women's numerical representation, Germany's reliance on voluntary party-level mechanisms has generated more uneven outcomes across the political spectrum. The comparative experiences of the two countries underscore a critical insight within feminist institutionalist scholarship: legislated gender quotas tend to yield more systematic and measurable progress in women's political participation, even when confronted with persistent cultural and institutional barriers that constrain women's substantive agency in governance.

3-1-3. Gender Parity in the United Kingdom and France

a. United Kingdom

One of the seminal works on women's position in British politics is Amanda Vickery's *Women, Privilege, and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present*. Vickery examines the social factors that have historically shaped women's political empowerment in the United Kingdom, highlighting the significance of women's socioeconomic status in facilitating their integration into political life.

Although female participation in UK politics has increased over the past decade, the political arena remains predominantly male-dominated. Apostolova and Cracknell (2017) highlight this disparity, noting that in the 2017 general elections, women constituted only 32% of Members of Parliament—a figure far from achieving equitable representation.

By the 2019 general elections, the number of female MPs in the House of Commons reached a record 220, according to *The Guardian*; nevertheless, two-thirds of parliamentary seats continued to be held by men, underscoring the persistence of gender imbalance within British political institutions.

Following the 2024 general elections, female representation in the United Kingdom reached a historic high of 40.5% in the House of Commons, marking a significant milestone in the pursuit of gender parity. Similarly, women now comprise approximately 31% of the House of Lords (House of Commons Library, 2024 General Election).

This steady progress reflects the cumulative impact of long-term political and institutional efforts to improve gender balance. Although the British government does not mandate legally binding gender parity requirements, these outcomes result largely from voluntary party quotas and sustained internal commitments within political parties (Inter-Parliamentary Union). The UK case thus demonstrates that non-legislated mechanisms, when reinforced by political will and institutional culture, can produce meaningful advances in women's political representation.

According to *Gender Quotas as Game Changers for the Recruitment, Selection, and Performance of Elected Politicians*, the United Kingdom employs a voluntary, party-based approach to gender parity rather than a legislated system. These voluntary quotas have helped reshape candidate selection processes and improve women's political representation.

Functioning as corrective mechanisms to address gender imbalances, they have nonetheless produced only partial effects, as their implementation remains constrained by party-specific regulations and the dynamics of political competition. This limitation partly explains why the United Kingdom continues to lag behind several European countries—most notably France—in achieving comprehensive gender parity in political representation (Aldrich & Daniel, 112–114).

b. France

Since the late 1990s, women's political leadership in France has become closely intertwined with the principle of *parité*—gender parity—as a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy. Although French women had been advocating for equal rights since the Revolution of 1789, it was not until two centuries later that tangible progress in their political representation began to emerge (Praud & Dauphin, 2011). Early women's engagement in French politics drew inspiration from revolutionary ideals of equality and social justice (Devance, 1977). As in other Western democracies, the recognition of women's suffrage constituted the first decisive step toward their substantive participation in political life.

The concept of gender parity in contemporary French politics is extensively examined in *Parity Democracy: Women's Political Representation in Fifth Republic France* by Jocelyne Praud and Sandrine Dauphin. The authors critique the French state's

protracted hesitation in guaranteeing women's political rights, emphasizing that France—despite its revolutionary legacy of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*—took nearly ninety-six years to grant women the right to vote. This delay, they argue, relegated France from an early leader in women's rights advocacy to a latecomer in achieving gender equality relative to other Western democracies.

Significant legislative progress occurred only at the turn of the twenty-first century. The constitutional amendments to Articles 3 and 4 in 1999, followed by the legislative acts of June 6, 2000, and January 31, 2007, sought to institutionalize gender parity by guaranteeing women equal access to electoral representation at both regional and national levels. Despite these legal reforms, French politics remains largely male-dominated, particularly within the two major parties—the Union for a Popular Movement (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*, UMP) and the Socialist Party (*Parti Socialiste*, PS)—where men continue to occupy the majority of elected positions (Praud & Dauphin, 2011).

Unlike the United Kingdom, which relies primarily on voluntary, party-based gender quotas, France has adopted a binding legislative framework through the 2000 *Loi sur la Parité* (Parity Law). This law mandates political parties to present gender-balanced candidate lists, with financial penalties imposed on parties that fail to comply. The introduction of this legislation generated a measurable increase in women's parliamentary representation: in 2017, women held approximately 39 percent of the seats in the National Assembly. However, subsequent elections have revealed signs of regression.

In the 2022 legislative elections, female candidates secured 37.3 percent of parliamentary seats, a figure that further declined to 36 percent following the 2024 elections (Inter-Parliamentary Union). Analysts attribute this decrease to a confluence of structural and strategic factors, including incumbency advantages, electoral timing, and the persistent placement of female candidates in less competitive constituencies—conditions that continue to limit women's electoral success. Consequently, despite its pioneering role in legislating parity, the French quota system remains only partially effective in sustaining durable gender balance in political representation (*Le Monde*, 2024).

3-1-4. The Scandinavian Model

The existing literature consistently identifies the Scandinavian countries as global exemplars of gender equality and inclusive governance. Owing to their egalitarian social structures and progressive political cultures, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Iceland have consistently ranked among the highest-performing nations in terms of women's political participation and representation (Haavio-Mannila et al., 1985; Karvonen & Selle, 1995; Bergqvist, 1999).

The Nordic model of gender politics has evolved through a complex interplay of historical, social, and institutional factors that collectively facilitated women's gradual yet sustained access to political power. As Bergqvist (1999) demonstrates in *Equal Democracies? Gender and Politics in the Nordic Countries*, the Nordic approach to gender equality emerged from a long-term process of social modernization, underpinned by welfare-state expansion, robust civic engagement, and electoral reform. These dynamics fostered a political environment in which gender equality became not merely an aspirational ideal but a structural component of democratic legitimacy.

Importantly, Bergqvist (1999) underscores that mechanisms for women's political inclusion differ across the Nordic region. Sweden, Finland, and Norway have institutionalized party-level quota systems, ensuring balanced gender representation in candidate selection and leadership structures. By contrast, Denmark and Iceland have achieved similar levels of gender parity through non-quota strategies, relying instead on deeply embedded egalitarian norms, inclusive welfare policies, and the normalization of women's political participation.

The Scandinavian model thus illustrates how gender equality can be institutionalized through both formal and informal mechanisms, combining social consensus, welfare-state policies, and political party practices to create enduring structures of inclusion. This regional experience demonstrates that sustained political commitment, reinforced by societal endorsement of equality norms, can yield transformative and lasting outcomes in women's political representation—without necessarily relying on legislated quotas.

a. Finland

Finland stands as a paradigmatic example of gender-inclusive governance within the Nordic region. The year 2003 represented a watershed moment in Finnish political history, as the three highest offices of the state—the President, the Prime

Minister, and the Speaker of Parliament—were simultaneously held by women, symbolizing the culmination of decades of institutional and social advancement toward gender equality. Between 2007 and 2011, this trajectory reached an unprecedented milestone, with women constituting 60% of cabinet members, marking one of the most gender-balanced governments globally (Preisler, 2013).

Finland has consistently sustained one of the highest levels of political gender parity worldwide. The *Eduskunta* (Parliament of Finland) is frequently cited as a near-parity institution: following the 2023 elections, women represented 46% of Members of Parliament (Statistics Finland, 2023). By 2024, women accounted for 45.5% of MPs, positioning Finland among the leading European democracies in terms of gender balance (Eurostat, 2025). Notably, women also continued to hold a dominant presence in executive office, occupying approximately 60% of ministerial positions in 2024.

These achievements underscore the structural effectiveness of Finland's comprehensive gender equality framework, which extends beyond the political domain to encompass social, educational, and economic spheres. This holistic policy approach—anchored in egalitarian social values, inclusive welfare provisions, and proactive state mechanisms—has institutionalized gender parity as an enduring feature of Finnish democracy rather than a transient political objective.

b. Norway

Norway ranks among Europe's most advanced democracies in achieving gender parity in political representation. By 2007, women occupied over 50% of political offices, reflecting early institutional commitment to inclusivity (Preisler, 2013). Throughout the 2010s, female representation in the Norwegian political system continued to rise, with women holding approximately 40% of parliamentary seats during that decade (Dahlerup, 2018). Following the 2021 elections, women secured 45% of seats in the *Storting*, and this progress persisted into 2024, with female representation accounting for 44.4% of parliamentary seats (Inter-Parliamentary Union, Norway: Storting, 2025).

This trend toward gender inclusivity extends to candidate selection and executive nominations. In the 2025 elections, women constituted 43% of all nominees. However, variations exist across the political spectrum: left-leaning parties consistently exceed parity, with women representing over 50% of candidates, whereas conservative parties lag behind, nominating only 35% female candidates (Statistics Norway, Parliamentary Election, List Candidates, 2025).

At the governmental level, women occupy 50% of ministerial portfolios, achieving full parity within the executive branch (OECD, 2023). These outcomes underscore Norway's position as a global exemplar of political gender equality. The combination of legally supported quotas and a strong culture of party-level enforcement demonstrates how institutional mechanisms, reinforced by political commitment, can produce sustained and substantive gains in women's representation. Norway thus provides a model of gender-inclusive governance, highlighting the potential of integrated legislative, party, and societal measures to institutionalize parity.

c. Sweden

Although Sweden has never been governed by a female head of state, it has achieved remarkable progress in political gender representation. Sainsbury (2004) documents that the proportion of women in the *Riksdag* increased from less than 15% in 1970 to 45% in 2004, while female representation in the cabinet rose from 10% to 50% over the same period.

Sainsbury attributes this substantial growth to the sustained advocacy of feminist and women's movements, particularly reformist feminists who promoted the active integration of women into Swedish political life. In Sweden, feminism has functioned as a powerful ideological and mobilizing force, enabling women to exercise their full citizenship rights alongside men and embedding gender equality as a central normative principle within the political sphere.

Since the 1990s, Sweden has consistently maintained a high level of gender parity, with female representation exceeding 40% across parliamentary and executive institutions. Following the 2024 elections, women held 45% of seats in the *Riksdag*. These achievements have resulted primarily from party-level initiatives rather than legislated quotas. Leftist and social democratic parties have implemented the zipper system, alternating male and female candidates on party lists to ensure equitable representation (Freidenvall, 2006).

Sweden thus exemplifies how culturally embedded egalitarian norms, coupled with voluntary party mechanisms, can produce and sustain women's political empowerment. The Swedish case demonstrates that legal mandates, while effective in some contexts, are not the sole pathway to achieving durable gender parity when egalitarian values are deeply institutionalized within political culture.

d. Denmark

Denmark is widely recognized as a leading democracy in promoting gender equality across all sectors of society, with its political system demonstrating consistently high levels of female participation. Unlike several other Nordic countries, Denmark has never implemented a formal legislative quota system for electing women to political office. Instead, its success in achieving gender parity has relied predominantly on voluntary party initiatives and deeply entrenched cultural norms of equality.

Historically, two Danish parties—the Social Democrats and the Socialist People's Party—experimented with voluntary gender quotas; however, both discontinued their use after 1999 (Christensen, 1999, p. 78). This historical context highlights that Denmark's enduring female representation is largely attributable to internal party strategies and broader societal norms rather than statutory mandates. The absence of legally mandated quotas has prompted debate regarding their potential efficacy, yet empirical evidence suggests that Denmark's model has been effective despite fluctuations in women's political participation (Augustin & Siim, 2015).

For example, in the 2011 parliamentary elections, women held 39% of ministerial positions and 50% of party leadership roles. By 2013, female representation declined slightly at the municipal level, with women constituting 29% of elected officials and 13% of mayors. Although these figures recovered by 2014—reaching 30% of ministers and 37% of party leaders—they remained below the 2011 levels (Agustín, European Parliament, 2015). These variations indicate that, while Denmark has achieved high levels of gender inclusion without formal quotas, progress remains sensitive to political and institutional dynamics.

Similar to the Swedish model, Denmark relies primarily on party-level commitments to gender equality. Political parties have implemented candidate selection strategies and internal regulations to enhance female representation (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2019). This approach has proven effective: in the 2022 parliamentary elections, women held 78 of the 179 seats in the *Folketing*, representing 43.6% of Members of Parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025).

Denmark's experience underscores that robust cultural norms, coupled with voluntary party mechanisms and internal governance strategies, can sustain high levels of women's political participation, even in the absence of legislated quotas.

e. Iceland

In Iceland, gender parity constitutes a central pillar of state policy, and the country is widely recognized as a global leader in feminist governance. Iceland was the first nation to elect a female president, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, in 1980.

As of 2024, the state is led by a female Prime Minister, Krístrún Frostadóttir, who was preceded by two other women heads of government in 2009 and 2017, Jóhanna Sigurardóttir and Katrín Jakobsdóttir, respectively (Government of Iceland, 2025; Ray, 2020).

The rise of the feminist movement during the 1970s played a pivotal role in advancing gender equality in Icelandic politics. The period from 1970 to 1990, often referred to as Iceland's "great feminist era," saw women achieve substantial leadership roles across multiple sectors, particularly in politics (Kristmundsdóttir, 1997).

Following the 2024 parliamentary elections, women won 29 of 63 seats in the *Althing*, representing 46% of the total, and 47% in the general elections of the same year. These high levels of representation are particularly notable given the absence of formal legislative gender quotas. Instead, Icelandic parties have relied on internal party mechanisms to ensure gender-balanced candidate lists. However, these measures are not uniformly adopted across all parties (BBC, 2021).

Iceland nearly achieved full parliamentary parity and a female-majority legislature during the 2021 elections. Initially, women held 33 of 63 seats, representing 52%, but after the final recount, their representation adjusted to 30 seats (*The Guardian*, 2021).

Despite these fluctuations, women continue to occupy prominent political positions, achieving representation levels that are exceptionally high both within Europe and globally. Iceland thus exemplifies how a combination of feminist political mobilization, party-level regulations, and cultural egalitarianism can sustain near-full gender parity in political institutions, even in the absence of binding legislative quotas.

3-2. Women's Roles and Political Agency in the MENA Region

While Western countries have achieved significant strides toward gender parity in politics, women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) continue to face systemic barriers to political representation and influence. Historically, women in Arab and North African societies have been underrepresented in formal political institutions, with access to decision-making processes constrained by entrenched patriarchal structures.

Cultural, religious, and historical factors have collectively reinforced this marginalization, shaping both societal expectations and institutional practices that limit women's participation in governance. This enduring exclusion also helps explain the relative scarcity of scholarly literature on female political leadership in the Arab world compared to the extensive research on Western contexts.

Marwa M. Shalaby (2018) emphasizes that women's progress in political and legislative spheres across the MENA region has been impeded by socio-cultural barriers that sustain patriarchal dominance. According to Shalaby, substantive attention to women's political participation emerged only after the Arab Spring, which catalyzed renewed debates on gender equality and the inclusion of women in legislative and executive roles.

Statistical measures illustrate the persistent underrepresentation of women in the region. Although women's political leadership has improved relative to the pre-Arab Spring era, representation remains limited. Across Arab national legislatures, women hold just over 10% of seats, and their parliamentary presence averages approximately 17%, compared with 27% in the Americas and 40% in Nordic countries.

This persistent gap underscores the structural and cultural challenges that continue to constrain women's political agency in MENA, despite the adoption of gender quotas in some countries after the Arab Spring as mechanisms to promote more equitable participation in decision-making (Shalaby, 2018).

3-2-1. Fatima El Mernissi's *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*

One of the most influential contributions to the study of women's political leadership in the Arab world is Fatima El Mernissi's *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*. Approaching the subject from a historical and feminist perspective, the work documents the involvement of sixteen female figures in state affairs, either formally—as queens, sultanas, and khatuns—or informally, through the intricate and often overlooked political influence exercised within the harem.

Mernissi contends that women have always been present in political life, yet their roles were systematically “erased” from historical narratives. This erasure reflects the association of political authority, particularly within the caliphate, with male leadership, which rendered female rulership virtually invisible in patriarchal historiography.

According to Mernissi, women were never absent from politics; rather, their contributions were deliberately marginalized or disregarded. Her work critiques the construction of a “patriarchal history” that excludes women from corridors of power, highlighting the ways in which historical narratives have minimized or silenced female political agency. Figures such as Sultana Shajarat Durr of Egypt and Syyida al-Hurra of Tetouan, Morocco, wielded significant authority and influence in their respective eras. Yet their achievements were largely omitted from conventional accounts, exemplifying the persistent undervaluation of women's political roles in Arab history.

Mernissi's analysis not only recovers these neglected historical figures but also provides a conceptual framework for understanding the structural forces—patriarchy, historiographical bias, and sociopolitical exclusion—that continue to shape women's political participation in the contemporary Arab world.

3-2-2. The Egyptian Case

An analysis of women's political leadership in the Arab world and the broader MENA region would be incomplete without reference to Egypt, given its historical, demographic, and geopolitical significance. Women's political status in Egypt has been profoundly shaped by socio-political upheavals, particularly moments of national transition and reform.

The 2011 Revolution marked a pivotal moment, placing women at the forefront of political activism and providing opportunities to defend their social interests and assert their rights as political decision-makers. This period of heightened engagement facilitated political empowerment and catalyzed reforms aimed at increasing female parliamentary representation. Under the Law on the House of Representatives (No. 46/2014), 56 of 596 parliamentary seats were reserved for women (OECD, 2018). From 2015 to 2020, women's representation consistently exceeded 15%, the lowest proportion within the MENA region during this period (OECD, 2018; IDEA, 2020).

Since 2015, Egypt has witnessed notable progress. In 2019, the government introduced a parliamentary gender quota of 25%, contributing to an increase in female seats in the House of Representatives, which reached 27% in the 2020 elections, with 162 women—148 elected and 14 appointed—out of a total of 586. This achievement positioned Egypt as having the highest average female parliamentary representation in the MENA region.

Despite these gains, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions across both parliamentary and ministerial levels (Draya, 2023; Waheed, 2023). In 2022, women held approximately 28% of parliamentary seats (165 members) but continued to occupy a minority of executive decision-making roles (*Egypt Today*, 2022). Following the 2024 elections, female representation in parliament reached 27.7%, while women held roughly 20% of ministerial positions, occupying 6 out of 30 portfolios (*Egyptian Streets*, 2024).

The Egyptian case thus illustrates both significant progress and persistent structural limitations in achieving gender parity. The 2019 constitutional amendments on gender parity, implemented since the 2020 elections, facilitated unprecedented increases in female parliamentary representation; however, quantitative growth has remained largely stagnant, hovering around 28% from 2020 through 2024 (Draya Center, 2023).

More importantly, this numerical representation has not translated into equitable distribution of power within political institutions. Women remain underrepresented in key leadership roles, including committee presidencies, parliamentary leadership positions, and ministerial portfolios, with their influence disproportionately concentrated in legislative rather than executive spheres (Egyptian Center for Women's Rights, 2025).

3-2-3. The Tunisian Case

Tunisia represents a notable model of women's rights and gender equity within the MENA region. Since the Arab Spring, the country has achieved significant advances in female political representation. In the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, the Tunisian government enacted a new electoral law institutionalizing robust gender parity provisions, which were further reinforced by the 2014 Constitution.

These compulsory gender quotas employ a mandatory alternation system between men and women on party lists, contributing to substantial gains in female parliamentary representation. In the 2014 National Constituent Assembly elections, women secured 68 of 217 seats, equivalent to 31% of the assembly (International IDEA, 2011), positioning Tunisia as having the highest rate of female political representation in the MENA region (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

This progress can be attributed to two primary factors. First, constitutional reforms following the Jasmine Revolution placed women at the forefront of political activism (ODI, 2014). Second, broader societal transformations associated with the Arab Spring heightened public awareness of gender equality and the importance of inclusive socio-political participation (UN Women, 2018). Complementing these developments, the Tunisian government implemented electoral measures designed to enhance female representation on party lists, thereby promoting women's participation in political decision-making (Goulding, 2011).

In 2017, a new electoral law mandated that political parties and coalitions ensure that half of the candidates in local elections were women, resulting in women comprising 47% of local councils in 2018. At the national level, Tunisian women held 54 of 217 seats (25%) in the Assembly of the Representatives of the People following the 2019 elections (IDEA, 2020).

Despite these gains, women's political representation experienced a sharp decline under President Kais Saied, who dismantled key gender equality mechanisms. Female representation fell to 15.5% (24 of 154 seats) in the 2022–2023 legislative elections, marking the lowest level since 2011 (UN Women Tunisia, 2023; Nilsson–van Iperen, 2023). This decline became even more pronounced following the 2023 local elections, during which women constituted only 12% of candidates, signaling a dramatic reduction in both political gender parity and symbolic visibility (TRT Global; Femmes & Leadership).

The decrease in women's representation reflects the absence of enforceable mechanisms accompanying electoral reforms. Although the 2022 Tunisian Constitution formally enshrines principles of gender equality and parity, these provisions remain largely rhetorical in the absence of concrete institutional reforms and practical enforcement measures. Consequently, women have experienced renewed marginalization within the Tunisian political sphere, highlighting the fragility of gender parity gains in contexts where institutional and political commitments are inconsistent.

3-3. Gender and Politics in Contemporary Morocco

Female political leadership in contemporary Morocco has its roots in the era of the French Protectorate, when Moroccan women actively participated in both the armed resistance and the nationalist movement alongside men. The struggle against colonialism united women from diverse social backgrounds, placing them at the forefront of political activism. Following independence, the women's movement shifted its focus toward emancipation and the pursuit of gender equality within the public sphere (Baker, 1998).

In the postcolonial period, female political activism in Morocco evolved from anti-colonial resistance to a broader contestation of patriarchy within the political system. The simultaneous rise of feminist movements and fundamentalist Islamist currents generated intense debate over women's emancipation and their entitlement to equal citizenship rights (Ennaji, 2016).

Political empowerment emerged as a central demand of Moroccan feminist activists, leading to the formation of numerous women's organizations, including the *Union Progressiste des Femmes Marocaines*, the *Union Nationale des Femmes Marocaines*, the *Union de l'Action Féminine*, and the *Democratic Association of Moroccan Women* (Salime, 2011). These organizations, together with subsequent constitutional reforms expanding women's socioeconomic rights, laid the groundwork for women's substantive integration into the Moroccan political sphere.

Several pivotal events catalyzed the engendering of Moroccan politics. The election of two women to Parliament in 1993, the revision of the Family Code (*Moudawana*) in 2004 under King Mohammed VI (Harrak, 2009), and Morocco's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2008—followed by its revision in 2011 (Tahri, 2003)—collectively advanced women's political status. The broader regional impact of the Arab Spring further contributed to these developments, reinforcing the demand for greater gender inclusivity in governance. By 2016, women held 81 of 319 seats in the Moroccan House of Representatives, representing 21% of its membership (Gender Quotas Database, 2020).

Subsequent reforms and elections further strengthened women's political presence. In the 2021 legislative elections, women secured 96 of 395 seats in the House of Representatives, accounting for 24.3% of membership. They also achieved 38.5% of seats in regional councils, 26.64% in municipal councils, and 35.6% at local, provincial, and prefectural levels (Mounsif, 2025). Following these elections, the newly formed government included seven female ministers out of twenty-eight (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2022), and as of 2025, women constitute 29% of Akhannouch's cabinet (Mouahidi, 2021).

Despite these advances, the path toward full gender parity remains long. While Morocco has made remarkable progress in women's political participation, representation remains modest relative to global benchmarks, particularly in Western democracies. According to the World Economic Forum's 2025 report, Morocco ranks 91st worldwide in women's political representation. This indicates that, despite the evolving role of women in Moroccan politics, progress toward gender parity continues to be constrained by the persistent dominance of men within political institutions.

4. Findings

The comparative trajectory of women's political representation across Western democracies, the MENA region, and Morocco reveals a complex interplay among institutional design, cultural norms, and political will. In advanced Western contexts—particularly the Nordic countries—the near attainment of gender parity is not solely the result of quota systems but reflects decades of gender-egalitarian socialization, comprehensive welfare policies, and deeply institutionalized commitments to equality (Freidenvall & Dahlerup, 412).

By contrast, countries such as Germany, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and France exhibit more uneven patterns. France's legislated parity law has increased women's parliamentary representation to 37.3% as of 2024; yet persistent party resistance and financial loopholes continue to undermine its full effectiveness (Murray, 27).

In the United Kingdom, reliance on voluntary, party-based quotas has produced slower progress, with women constituting only 35% of the House of Commons in 2024—a figure substantially below Nordic standards (Childs & Lovenduski, 119). These examples demonstrate that, although quotas are vital instruments for promoting gender balance, their efficacy depends on party structures, enforcement mechanisms, and the broader sociopolitical context.

The MENA region illustrates both the promise and fragility of quota-based reforms. Tunisia's adoption of parity and alternation rules in 2011 initially yielded substantial gains; however, subsequent electoral cycles and institutional backsliding have reduced women's parliamentary representation to its lowest level since 2011 (Nilsson & van Iperen).

Egypt presents a comparable paradox: constitutional guarantees and quota expansions enhanced women's representation in 2020, yet entrenched authoritarianism and patriarchal resistance continue to constrain their substantive political influence (Kassem, 202). These cases underscore the precarious nature of women's political empowerment in transitional or authoritarian contexts, where constitutional commitments to gender equality often conceal the gradual erosion of institutional safeguards (Human Rights Watch).

Morocco occupies an intermediate position, representing a hybrid model of gender parity and equality. The post-2011 constitutional framework institutionalized gender equality and expanded opportunities for women's political participation. Quotas implemented in parliamentary, regional, and municipal elections have produced tangible results, marking the highest levels of female inclusion in Moroccan governance to date. Nevertheless, Morocco's global ranking remains modest, highlighting a persistent gap between domestic progress and international benchmarks and indicating that while institutional reforms can create openings for women, broader sociopolitical norms continue to shape their influence and visibility.

5. Conclusion

The Moroccan case illustrates the dual nature of women's political empowerment in transitional democracies, combining notable quantitative gains with persistent qualitative limitations. The introduction of quotas and constitutional reforms has reshaped the political landscape, enhancing the visibility and legitimacy of women's participation in parliament, government, and local councils. Nevertheless, representation remains below numerical parity and is substantively constrained by entrenched political hierarchies. Compared to advanced Western democracies—particularly the Nordic countries, where near-parity has been achieved—Morocco's progress appears modest; yet within the MENA region, it represents one of the most sustained and institutionalized trajectories of female political advancement.

These findings underscore a critical lesson: quotas and constitutional guarantees, while necessary, are insufficient on their own. Without robust enforcement mechanisms, cultural transformation, and institutional restructuring, gains remain fragile and vulnerable to reversal, as evidenced in Tunisia and Egypt.

For Morocco, the principal challenge lies in moving beyond descriptive representation toward substantive influence, ensuring that women not only occupy political office but also actively shape policy outcomes and political priorities. Consequently, Moroccan women's political participation can be characterized as "unfinished progress"—an incremental yet incomplete journey toward gender parity that reflects both the promise and the limitations of reform within hybrid political systems.

More broadly, gender equality constitutes a global imperative and a fundamental dimension of democratic governance. Politics remains a critical arena in which gender parity is essential. While women in advanced democracies, such as the Nordic countries and the United States, have achieved prominent political positions and significantly narrowed the gender gap, disparities persist across much of the Arab and African world, including Morocco.

Despite constitutional reforms and formal commitments to democratic practice that have expanded women's access to decision-making, the path toward full gender parity in Morocco remains protracted. Progress continues to be constrained by enduring male dominance, structural inequalities, and sociocultural norms that permeate both the political sphere and the broader public domain. Achieving substantive gender parity will require sustained institutional commitment, societal transformation, and the empowerment of women as active agents in shaping the political agenda.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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