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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Paths to Parity: Gender Progress in Moroccan Politics

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| ABSTRACT

This article examines the progress and challenges of women's political participation in Morocco, focusing on the interplay between legal frameworks, sociocultural dynamics, and institutional mechanisms. Through an analysis of constitutional reforms, electoral systems, and gender quotas, the study highlights Morocco's advancements in gender parity, including increased representation in parliament (24.3% as of 2021 elections) and historic appointments of women to ministerial and mayoral positions. However, persistent barriers such as cultural stereotypes, economic constraints, and male-dominated party structures reveal the limitations of quota systems in achieving substantive equality. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, the article underscores the need for transformative interventions beyond numerical representation to ensure meaningful political influence for women. The findings contribute to broader discussions on gender equality in transitional democracies, offering insights into the complexities of balancing formal reforms with sociocultural change.

1. Introduction

1.1 Legal and Constitutional Developments in Women's Political Participation in Morocco

The 1962 Constitution represented a watershed moment in Moroccan legal history by formally institutionalizing the principle of gender equality, thereby establishing a constitutional foundation for women's political participation. This progressive provision marked a decisive break from previous legal frameworks that had systematically constrained women's civil and political rights. Article 8 of the Constitution explicitly guaranteed equal political rights to all citizens, creating new possibilities for women's engagement in public affairs (Benradi, 2018).

Subsequent constitutional revisions in 1972, 1992, and 1996 progressively strengthened these guarantees, though implementation often lagged behind legislative intent. The 1993 parliamentary elections, conducted under the reformed 1992 Constitution, constituted a historic breakthrough when two women - Bassima Hakkaoui and Badia Skalli - secured seats in the House of Representatives. This achievement resulted from strategic electoral reforms, particularly the partial adoption of a list voting system that facilitated women's candidacies (Darhour & Dahlerup, 2013). While this development ended the absolute male monopoly on parliamentary representation, progress remained incremental. By the 1997 elections, female candidacies had increased to approximately 90, yet actual representation remained disproportionately low, revealing persistent structural barriers in Morocco's political system during this period of democratic transition (Merzougui, 2021).

These domestic constitutional developments occurred alongside Morocco's deepening engagement with international human rights frameworks. As a founding member of the United Nations, Morocco ratified numerous international conventions, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. The UDHR's Article 21, which guarantees equal

participation in government, established gender equality as a fundamental democratic principle (United Nations, 1948). Legal scholars have noted how this international framework created normative pressure for domestic reforms (Brown, 2016).

The international momentum for women's rights accelerated through a series of landmark UN conferences. The 1975 Mexico City Conference, held during International Women's Year, produced the first World Plan of Action for women's empowerment, with particular emphasis on political participation (United Nations, 1975). Subsequent conferences in Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985) expanded this agenda, explicitly linking women's political representation to broader democratic governance. As Mair (1986) observed, "The Nairobi conference marked a turning point by framing women's political participation not as a concession but as a democratic imperative" (p. 112).

The 1995 Beijing Conference and its resulting Platform for Action proved particularly transformative, establishing comprehensive standards for women's political participation. The Beijing Declaration explicitly called for "removing all barriers to women's equal participation in political life and decision-making at all levels" (United Nations, 1995, para. 13). Morocco's active participation in these conferences created both international obligations and domestic expectations for reform.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Morocco ratified in 1993 with reservations, became a crucial catalyst for legal changes. Article 7 of CEDAW specifically requires states to "ensure women's equal right to participate in political and public life" (United Nations, 1979). Domestic implementation of these international commitments became evident in the landmark 2004 Family Code reforms, which significantly expanded women's legal status (Sadiqi, 2016). However, scholars note that "while constitutional and international frameworks established formal equality, informal barriers to women's political participation persisted" (Salia, 2011, p. 78).

The intersection of these domestic constitutional developments and international human rights norms created an evolving legal landscape for women's political participation. As Bergh (2012) notes, "Morocco's experience demonstrates how constitutional reforms and international commitments can mutually reinforce progressive change, even when implementation faces resistance" (p. 145). This dual dynamic of formal progress and practical challenges continues to characterize women's political participation in contemporary Morocco.

1.2 The Moroccan Political System: Electoral Framework and Gender
1.2.1 Representation

Morocco's political system combines a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy, featuring a bicameral legislature that consists of the House of Representatives (lower chamber) and the House of Councillors (upper chamber). The House of Representatives includes 395 members elected through a mixed electoral system, while the 120 members of the House of Councillors are selected by electoral colleges representing various professional and territorial interests (Gaul, 2021; World Bank, 2022). This structure reflects Morocco's attempt to balance democratic representation with its historical monarchical traditions.

The electoral system employs an innovative hybrid model that combines proportional representation and majoritarian components. Of the 395 seats in the House of Representatives, 60 are allocated through a national proportional representation list, while the remaining 335 are filled through direct elections in local constituencies (Bennani, 2020). This dual approach aims to ensure both regional representation and national political balance. The proportional representation component has been particularly significant for advancing women's political participation through the national list quota system.

Morocco's 2011 Constitution represented a watershed moment for gender equality, enshrining equal rights across civil, political, economic, social, and cultural spheres as a constitutional imperative (Kingdom of Morocco, 2011). As Head of Government Aziz Akhannouch emphasized in his 2023 parliamentary address, these reforms marked a paradigm shift: "The constitutional reforms under His Majesty King Mohammed VI have transformed women's political participation from a symbolic gesture to a national priority" (Government of Morocco, 2023). This commitment was institutionalized through subsequent mechanisms like the National Committee for Gender Equality and significant electoral reforms.
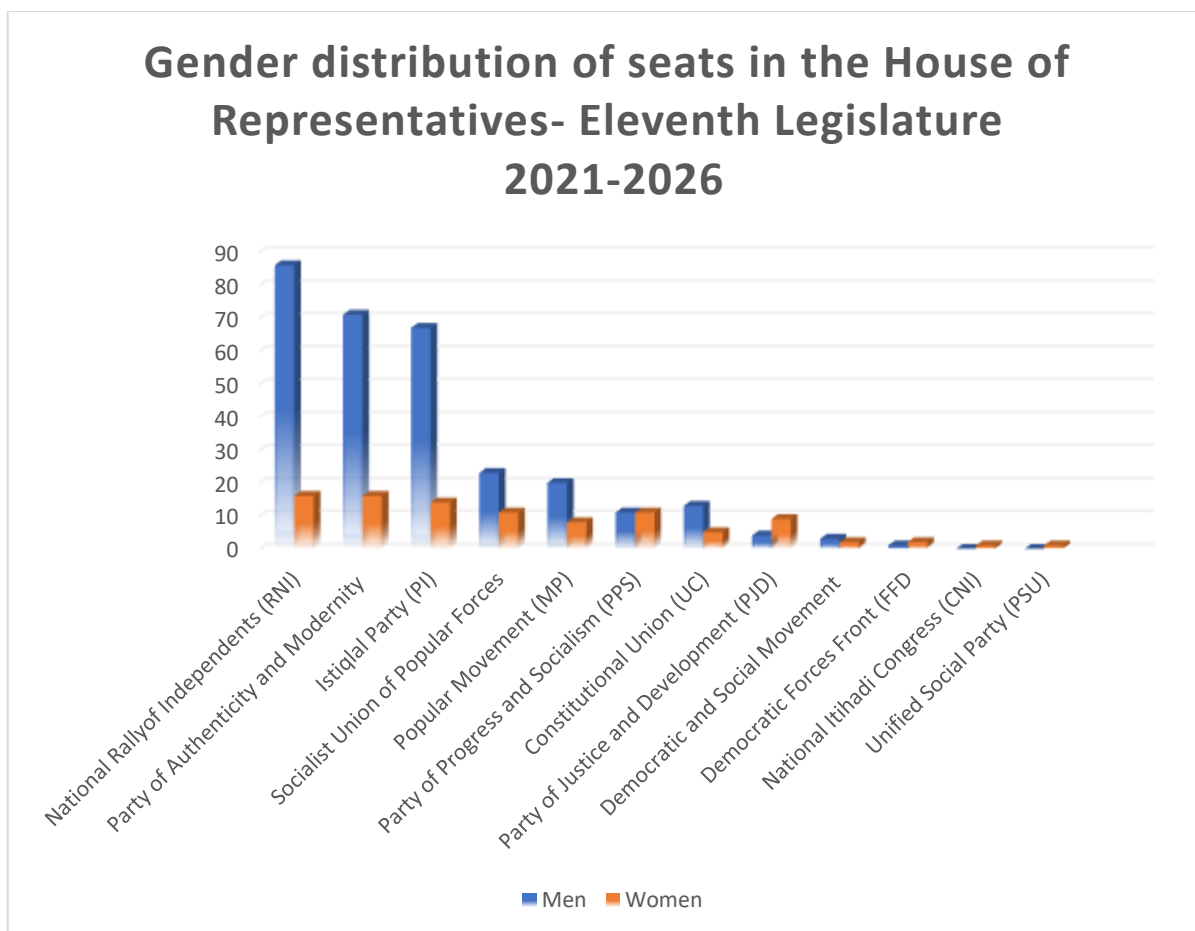
The constitutional framework's Article 19 guarantees gender equality in civil and political rights, while Article 30 specifically safeguards women's electoral participation (Kingdom of Morocco, 2011). These provisions were operationalized through landmark legislation, including Organic Law No. 27.11 (2011) establishing a 60-seat national quota system (Journal Officiel, 2011) and the Electoral Code's anti-discrimination clauses (Kingdom of Morocco, 2008). The government's sustained commitment is evidenced by the 2021 electoral reforms, which expanded reserved seats to 90 and introduced financial incentives for parties fielding female candidates (Government of Morocco, 2023) - a strategic enhancement of the original quota system that demonstrates Morocco's evolving approach to gender parity.

These institutional reforms have generated substantive, though uneven, progress in women's political representation. Quantitative data reveals a steady upward trajectory, with women occupying 81 parliamentary seats (20.5%) following the 2016 elections, rising to 96 seats (24.3%) by 2021 (High Commission for Planning, 2021). While these figures demonstrate the efficacy of quota systems in boosting numerical representation, qualitative analyses uncover persistent structural inequities. As Darhour and Dahlerup (2013) document, women remain conspicuously absent from party leadership roles, while deeply-entrenched cultural norms continue to distort candidate selection processes.

The spatial distribution of these gains proves particularly revealing. The overwhelming concentration of female legislators in nationally-reserved quota seats (90 seats) compared to locally-elected constituency seats (6 seats) underscores what Head of Government Aziz Akhannouch identifies as systemic confinement: "While quotas have increased numbers, we must address systemic barriers that confine women to 'quota seats' rather than competitive constituencies" (Government of Morocco, 2023). This geographical imbalance reflects enduring voter biases and party gatekeeping practices that privilege male candidates in direct electoral contests.

Morocco's multiparty system, featuring over 30 registered political parties, presents both opportunities and challenges for women's political participation. While major parties like the Party of Justice and Development (PJD), Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), and Istiqlal Party have implemented internal measures to promote women's participation, the effectiveness of these measures varies significantly (Storm, 2018). Some parties have adopted internal quotas for women in leadership positions, while others maintain more traditional structures.

Recent electoral reforms in 2021 introduced additional measures to strengthen gender parity, including financial incentives for parties that field female candidates and enhanced training programs for women in politics (Ministry of Interior, 2021). These developments reflect Morocco's ongoing commitment to addressing gender disparities in political representation, though implementation challenges remain. The Moroccan experience demonstrates how constitutional reforms, electoral engineering, and party-level initiatives can work together to advance women's political participation, while also highlighting the persistent cultural and institutional barriers that require continued attention. The following chart reveals those barriers through its breakdown of gender distribution in the House of Representatives.

Gender distribution of seats in the House of Representatives- Eleventh Legislature 2021-2026

The data on women's representation in Morocco's House of Representatives reveals both progress and persistent gaps in gender parity. The National Rally of Independents (RNI) and the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) lead with 16 women MPs each, demonstrating their relative commitment to gender inclusion. However, this represents only 18.6% and 22.5% of their total seats respectively, showing that even progressive parties have room for improvement.

The Istiqlal Party follows with 14 women MPs (20.9% of its seats), while smaller parties exhibit stark disparities. The Socialist Union of Popular Forces has 11 women (47.8% of its seats), and the Party of Progress and Socialism achieves full parity with 11 women (100% of its seats). These contrasts highlight how party size and ideology influence gender representation, with some smaller left leaning parties outperforming larger counterparts.

At the other extreme, several parties show minimal female participation. The Democratic and Social Movement has just 2 women (66.7% of its small seat share), while the Democratic Forces Front and National Itihadi Congress each have 1 or 2 women MPs. Most concerning is the Unified Social Party's complete absence of women representatives. These figures validate concerns about tokenism in some political factions. The data particularly underscores the quota system's mixed impact. While it has ensured minimum representation, the concentration of women in certain parties suggests cultural and structural barriers persist elsewhere. The underrepresentation in Islamist oriented parties like the Party of Justice and Development (9 women out of 4 seats seems inconsistent and may reflect reporting errors) warrants further investigation.

Clearly, the numbers confirm that while legal mechanisms like quotas have increased women's presence, cultural transformation within parties remains incomplete. As the Head of Government noted, true equality requires moving beyond numerical targets to meaningful power sharing in all political spaces. The findings reinforce the need for the 2023 2026 Governmental Equality Plan's multipronged approach, particularly its focus on party level reforms and leadership pipelines. They also validate the article's recommendation for stronger enforcement mechanisms and incentives to promote women in competitive constituencies beyond quota seats.

1.3 Factors Affecting Moroccan Women's Political Participation

The participation and representation of women in Moroccan politics are influenced by a complex interplay of socioeconomic factors, including historical legacies, legislative frameworks, sociocultural dynamics, economic conditions, and educational opportunities. This section examines these variables to provide insight into the intricate network that shapes women's political engagement in Morocco.

Historically, Moroccan culture has confined women to domestic roles, limiting their involvement in public affairs. Gender roles in Moroccan society are deeply rooted in societal norms, cultural expectations, and historical traditions (Ennaji, 2016). These factors significantly shape perceptions of women and dictate the duties they are expected to fulfill. A key manifestation of these traditional gender roles is the societal expectation that women prioritize caregiving and household responsibilities (de Beauvoir, 1949). Consequently, women are often seen as the primary nurturers of the family unit, which restricts their ability to participate in political life.

Education plays a crucial role in shaping women's political engagement in Morocco. Historically, limited access to education has hindered women's participation in public affairs. However, education empowers women by equipping them with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate the political landscape effectively. Recent expansions in educational opportunities have led to significant improvements in women's literacy and academic achievements, enabling greater political involvement. As Ennaji (2015, p. 58) notes, "Following these changes, a number of women have risen to high positions in the public arena, particularly urban educated women who belong to politically and economically influential families."

Economic factors also present substantial challenges for Moroccan women in politics. The increasing commercialization of politics requires significant financial resources, which many women lack due to limited access to and ownership of productive assets (Bari, 2005, p. 6). Ennaji (2016) highlights that despite women's crucial role in socioeconomic development, gender disparities in resource access persist, further restricting their political engagement.

Family dynamics and societal expectations further complicate women's political participation. Traditional family structures, reinforced by cultural norms, often pressure women to prioritize domestic responsibilities over political ambitions. These norms dictate that women should focus on caregiving and homemaking, leaving little room for public leadership roles. As Nelson, Chowdhury, and Caudhurī (1994) argue, "Women's socially shaped choices, especially to concentrate on child rearing and homemaking, along with social norms comprising gender-based rules about proper political activity, shape political socialization." Balancing familial duties with political aspirations remains a significant challenge for many Moroccan women.

Gender stereotypes in Moroccan society also hinder women's political participation. Deep-seated cultural beliefs often portray women as less capable leaders, reinforcing the notion that political decision-making should remain a male domain. Historically, Moroccan women have been confined to domestic roles, perpetuating the stereotype that leadership is inherently masculine (Moghadam, 2005). Even today, women are frequently perceived as emotional or unsuitable for leadership, further marginalizing them in political spheres.

The media plays a dual role in either reinforcing or challenging these stereotypes. While positive media representation can shift public perceptions, Moroccan media often perpetuates traditional gender roles, depicting women as caregivers rather than political leaders (Ward & Grower, 2020). According to the United Nations (2006, p. 45), "The media may perpetuate stereotypes of women in their traditional roles rather than conveying a positive image of women as political leaders." Addressing biased media portrayals is essential for fostering greater gender equality in politics.

Nepotism is another barrier to women's political representation in Morocco. The practice of favoring family members in political appointments reinforces existing power structures, often excluding women from decision-making roles. Political parties in Morocco frequently rely on clientelistic networks, distributing benefits to select individuals rather than promoting merit-based inclusion (Barnett & Shalaby, 2021). Studies indicate that political elites tend to appoint relatives, further marginalizing women (Sater, 2017). This systemic nepotism sustains gender disparities by concentrating power among a select few, making it difficult for women to break into political leadership. Abdelilah Benkirane, the current Secretary General of the Justice and Development Party (PJD) and the previous Head of Government from 2011 to 2016, recently brought attention to this issue. In a speech on May the first 2025, Benkirane criticised the way that certain male politicians use the national quota list to nominate women, typically their wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, or close relatives, for parliamentary positions based on personal ties rather than qualifications. He underlined that this type of partiality defeats the goal of gender quotas and does not advance women who are actually qualified. As long as they are chosen on the basis of qualifications and ability rather than nepotism. Benkirane stated his desire to see a government composed completely of women (PJD, 2025).

Financial constraints also limit women's political participation. Campaigning requires substantial resources, and women often struggle to secure adequate funding for advertising, travel, and other campaign-related expenses (Berriane, 2015). However, digital platforms offer a cost-effective alternative, allowing female candidates to reach wider audiences through social media without excessive financial burdens (Moghadam, 2019).

Sexual harassment presents another significant obstacle for women in politics. Female politicians frequently face online and offline harassment, including threats and gender-based violence. Research by Amnesty International (2018) reveals that women in politics, particularly those from marginalized groups, endure disproportionate levels of online abuse (Ging & Siapera, 2018). Physical intimidation further discourages women from pursuing political careers, creating a hostile environment (Du Pommier, 2016).
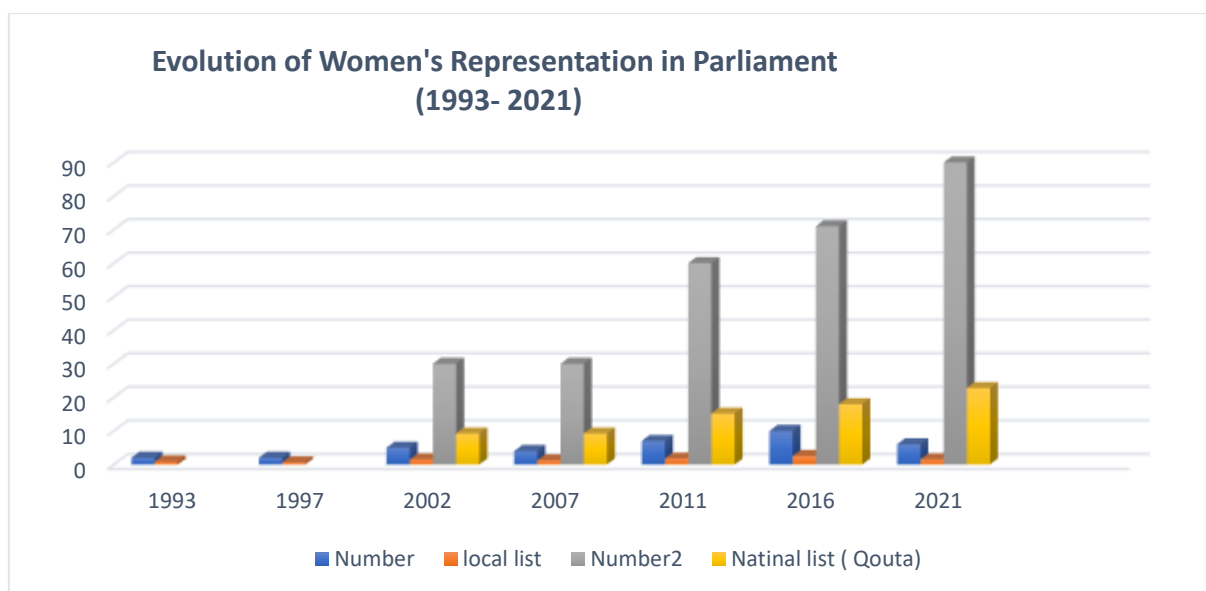
Finally, the lack of strong support networks exacerbates the challenges women face in politics. Mentorship programs and peer support systems can enhance resilience and provide guidance for aspiring female leaders (Bari, 2005). Establishing safe spaces within political institutions and connecting emerging leaders with experienced mentors are crucial steps toward fostering women's political participation (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2016). Addressing these multifaceted barriers is essential for achieving gender equality in Moroccan politics.

2. Gender Quotas: Transforming Political Representation in Morocco
Gender quotas have emerged as a globally recognized strategy for promoting gender equality in political representation. In Morocco, the adoption of gender quotas seeks to address historical disparities in women's political participation. This section evaluates the impact of gender quotas on women's political engagement in Morocco, analyzing their effectiveness and limitations.

The push for gender quotas in Morocco gained momentum in 2002, when women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-Islamist political groups advocated for institutional reforms to enhance female parliamentary representation (Slaoui & Belghiti, 2017). The introduction of gender quotas has significantly influenced candidate selection processes, compelling political parties to include a minimum number of women on electoral lists (Darhour & Dahlerup, 2013). This policy has not only increased the visibility of women in elections but also encouraged political parties to adopt more inclusive and diverse candidate lists. By legally mandating women's inclusion, Morocco has witnessed a measurable rise in female political participation, challenging traditional gender norms and reshaping perceptions of women's roles in governance (Darhour & Dahlerup, 2013).

Since the implementation of the quota system, Morocco has seen notable progress in women's political representation. However, this progress has been uneven. While quota seats have substantially increased the number of women in the House of Representatives, women continue to face barriers in securing elected positions outside the quota system. Data from post-2002 elections reveal an inverse relationship between the growth of quota seats and the number of women elected through local constituencies. Although there was a modest increase in women elected via local lists between 2002 and 2016, their numbers dropped to just six in the 2021 legislative elections. This decline occurred despite a favorable electoral framework and a political environment dominated by liberal parties. The following chart illustrates the progression of female participation in Morocco's parliamentary system over nearly three decades. It highlights the number of women elected through two distinct channels: the local list and the national list or quota system. The chart reveals a steady increase in women's representation, particularly from 2002 onwards, when the quota system began to significantly impact female inclusion in politics. Each year is also marked with a percentage that reflects the overall proportion of women in parliament during that period.

Evolution of Women's Representation in Parliament (1993- 2021)

Despite the progress shown in the chart, women's representation has recently stagnated. This is partly due to political parties placing women low on candidate lists, especially in rural areas where voting systems favor men. The quota system, while increasing initial access, has not helped many women secure re-election or move into more influential political roles. Efforts to build on quota-based experience have been limited by weak networks, reduced backing from party women's groups, and the continued dominance of male political figures.

The legal framework governing elections, while designed to promote equality, has inadvertently reinforced obstacles for women. The Organic Law of the House of Councilors, despite its alignment with constitutional principles, has had minimal impact due to the indirect nature of elections and the overwhelming influence of male-dominated political and professional networks. These structural challenges highlight the limitations of gender quotas as a standalone solution. While they have increased numerical representation, deeper systemic reforms are needed to ensure meaningful and sustained political participation for Moroccan women.

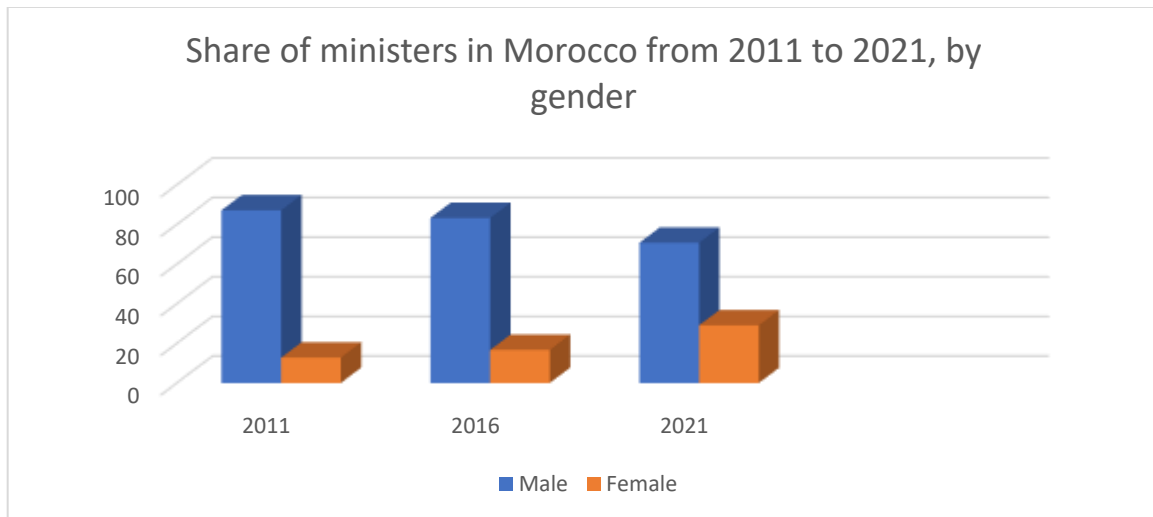### 3. Women's Political Participation in Morocco: Progress and Milestones

Women's participation in politics is fundamental to modern democracies, as it ensures diverse perspectives in decision-making processes. Morocco has made significant strides in this regard, with women increasingly occupying key political positions, though challenges remain in achieving full gender parity.

According to the latest Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) report (2025), Morocco ranks 102nd globally in women's legislative representation, with 95 female members of parliament constituting 24.3% of the House of Representatives. While this marks an improvement from previous years, it still lags behind global leaders such as Rwanda (63.8%), Cuba (55.7%), and regional peers like South Africa and Senegal (IPU, 2025). Nevertheless, Morocco surpasses several countries, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, demonstrating gradual progress in women's political inclusion.

A historic achievement in Morocco's political landscape is the appointment of seven women to ministerial positions in the current government, compared to only four in the previous administration (Government of Morocco, 2025). These women hold key portfolios that shape national policy:

- **Nadia Fettah Alaoui,** Minister of Economy and Finance
- **Leila Benali,** Minister of Energy Transition and Sustainable Development
- **Fatima Zahra Ammor,** Minister of Tourism, Handicrafts, and Social Economy
- **Nabila Rmili,** Minister of Health and Social Protection
- **Fatima-Zahra Mansouri,** Minister of Housing and Urban Policy
- **Ghita Mezzour,** Minister Delegate for Digital Transition and Administrative Reform
- **Aouatif Hayar,** Minister of Solidarity, Social Integration, and Family

The following chart illustrates the progress of women's share of ministers during the last 3 elections.

Share of ministers in Morocco from 2011 to 2021, by gender

These appointments reflect a growing recognition of women's leadership in traditionally male-dominated sectors.

At the municipal level, Morocco has witnessed transformative progress in women's political leadership, marked by the historic election of women to mayoral positions in all three major metropolitan centers. As Head of Government Aziz Akhannouch affirmed, "The election of women mayors in Rabat, Casablanca, and Marrakesh marks a cultural shift in local governance" (Government of Morocco, 2023). This watershed moment features Asmaa Rhlalou's ascension as Rabat's first female mayor - which she heralded as "a historical day for the city of lights" (AFP, 2021), alongside Nabila Rmili in Casablanca and Fatima-Zahra Mansouri's return to Marrakesh's mayoral office (2009-2015; reelected 2021).

These milestones achieve dual significance: they visibly disrupt traditional gender norms in public leadership while establishing concrete models of women's executive capabilities. The concentration of female mayors in Morocco's three largest cities (representing 32% of the urban population) demonstrates particular progress in high-stakes political arenas historically dominated by male networks.

In political party leadership, Dr. Nabila Mounib stands out as the first woman to lead a Moroccan political party, serving as General Secretary of the Unified Socialist Party since 2012. Her leadership exemplifies the potential for women to shape Morocco's political future beyond elected offices.

Despite measurable advancements, Morocco's executive leadership remains an unbroken male domain, with all 17 Heads of Government since independence being men (Government of Morocco, 2025). This glass ceiling persists alongside systemic barriers that the Head of Government explicitly acknowledges, including "male-dominated party structures and rural-urban disparities" (Government of Morocco, 2023), structural challenges that perpetuate women's exclusion from apex decision-making roles.

While Morocco's rise to 24.3% parliamentary representation marks progress, its 102nd global ranking (IPU, 2025) underscores the need for transformative interventions. The government's "2023-2026 Governmental Equality Plan" proposes a multipronged approach to address these gaps, prioritizing "economic empowerment, anti-violence measures, and leadership training to bridge the gap between representation and influence" (Government of Morocco, 2023). This strategic framework recognizes that achieving true parity requires moving beyond electoral quotas to dismantle entrenched sociocultural barriers.

4. Conclusion

The Moroccan experience with women's political participation presents a nuanced picture of progress and persistent challenges. While women now hold 24.3% of parliamentary seats (IPU, 2025) and have achieved historic firsts in mayoral and ministerial positions, their representation remains uneven across different levels of governance. The country's 102nd global ranking in legislative gender parity underscores both the achievements made since the 2011 constitutional reforms and the considerable ground yet to be covered.

The quota system has successfully increased women's numerical representation, particularly in reserved parliamentary seats, with 95 female MPs currently serving in the House of Representatives (IPU, 2025). However, as evidenced by the stagnation in local

constituency seats and the absence of women in the prime ministerial office throughout Morocco's history, these institutional mechanisms alone cannot overcome deeply entrenched barriers. As Head of Government Aziz Akhannouch emphasizes, "True parity requires transforming political culture—not just laws. We must empower women to lead beyond quotas, from committee chairs to the Prime Minister's office" (Government of Morocco, 2023). This imperative becomes clear when examining the recent breakthroughs of women leading major cities like Rabat, Casablanca, and Marrakesh (AFP, 2021) and holding key ministries such as Economy and Finance - achievements that demonstrate the potential for transformation when structural opportunities emerge.

Yet significant challenges persist. The male-dominated nature of political parties, evidenced by only one woman leading a party among Morocco's 34 political organizations, continues to constrain women's access to decision-making power. The concentration of female politicians in quota seats rather than competitive constituencies suggests that political parties have been reluctant to nurture women's leadership beyond mandatory requirements.

The appointments of women to strategic ministerial portfolios, including Nadia Fettah Alaoui in Economy and Finance and Leila Benali in Energy Transition (Government of Morocco, 2025), demonstrate how women's leadership can reshape policy priorities when given meaningful opportunities. These successes, combined with the growing presence of women in local governance, suggest that cultural transformation is underway, albeit unevenly.

Ultimately, Morocco's journey toward gender-inclusive politics requires moving beyond numerical representation to substantive influence. This means not just increasing the number of women in politics, but ensuring they have equal access to leadership roles, committee chairs, and agenda-setting positions. The foundation has been laid through constitutional and electoral reforms, but building truly inclusive political institutions will require sustained commitment from all stakeholders - the government, political parties, civil society, and the electorate alike.

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