

Executive Summary

This study, entitled “Patterns of Electoral Behaviour among Women in the Arab World and Context-Dependent Breakthroughs: Towards a Transition from Quantitative to Qualitative Political Representation,” examines how women’s participation in electoral processes is shaped and how social, political, cultural, economic, and institutional factors influence their decisions to vote, stand for election, or abstain, as well as the nature and effectiveness of their representation after entering elected institutions. It argues that progress in women’s political participation should not be measured solely by voter turnout or by the number of women candidates and elected representatives. It must also be assessed in terms of political autonomy, criteria of electoral choice, conditions of competition, and the actual ability to influence public policy and decision-making.

The study does not assume that women constitute a homogeneous electoral bloc or that gender identity necessarily takes precedence over other political and social affiliations and interests. A woman’s vote for a female candidate is therefore not, in itself, sufficient evidence of an autonomous decision or a departure from prevailing electoral patterns. Likewise, voting for a male candidate does not automatically indicate a lack of autonomy. The significance of an electoral choice depends on how it was formed and on the extent to which it reflects awareness, freedom, comparison among alternatives, and an assessment of competence, programmes, performance, and the public interest.

The study uses “patterned electoral behaviour” to refer to recurrent patterns of voting, candidacy, representation, and abstention shaped by prevailing social, cultural, political, and institutional structures. It employs “breakthrough” to denote a significant departure from a previously dominant pattern at one or more levels of the electoral process. Such a departure demonstrates that the prevailing pattern is no longer absolute, without implying that it has disappeared or undergone comprehensive change. “Transformation,” by contrast, refers to deeper change characterised by breadth, repetition, accumulation, sustainability, and the ability to move across the levels of candidacy, voting, representation, and political effectiveness.

The study adopts a comparative analytical approach that is predominantly qualitative, while using descriptive quantitative indicators to clarify trends emerging from the fieldwork. It combines a review of the literature, studies, reports, and electoral data with an analysis of breakthroughs in six countries: Jordan, Tunisia, Iraq, Morocco, Egypt, and Lebanon. Fieldwork was conducted in Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon through semi-structured interviews with three groups: women politicians, candidates, and party and civil-society actors; regular women voters; and intermittent voters and abstainers. Given the purposive and limited nature of the samples, the findings are interpreted as qualitative and explanatory indicators rather than statistically representative results.

The study finds that women’s electoral behaviour in the Arab world is shaped by a complex interaction among family, tribe, sect, political party, political culture, economic resources, media, and the electoral system. These determinants do not carry the same weight or operate in the same way in every country. Family or tribal loyalties predominate in some contexts, while party or

sectarian affiliations are more influential in others. Clientelistic and service-based considerations also intersect with limited trust in institutions and doubts about the value of participation. Many of these factors affect women and men alike, but women encounter additional constraints resulting from unequal access to resources and influence and from persistent perceptions that associate leadership and politics with men.

Political autonomy is not a binary condition separating independence from dependence. It exists in varying degrees and develops through cumulative processes. A woman may enter politics through a party, family network, or quota and subsequently acquire greater autonomy through practice, experience, and personal legitimacy. Conversely, she may be organisationally independent while remaining constrained by limited resources, the electoral system, or prevailing social norms. Autonomy should therefore be assessed not merely by the route through which women enter politics, but by the extent to which they participate in shaping political choices and can review, challenge, and influence them.

Political and electoral systems are not neutral frameworks; they shape women's opportunities to stand for election, compete, and gain representation. Quotas, electoral lists, appointments, and legal reforms have produced visible breakthroughs in women's numerical presence. Yet these mechanisms have not automatically generated corresponding changes in voter behaviour, party selection procedures, or the autonomy and effectiveness of elected women. Quotas may facilitate the accumulation of experience and help change perceptions of women in politics, but they may also become a ceiling on representation when women's victories remain confined to guaranteed seats and do not extend to open competition.

The scale of change varies across the dimensions of electoral behaviour. Candidacy has proved most open to breakthroughs, owing to institutional reforms, expanded education, civic engagement, generational change, and moments of political opening and protest. Voting behaviour has undergone more limited changes, reflected in the growing importance of competence, programmes, achievements, and accountability alongside the continued influence of primary affiliations. Representation and political effectiveness have remained more resistant to change, as increases in the number of elected women have not consistently been matched by access to leadership positions, resources, or influence over legislation, oversight, and decision-making.

The country comparison shows that breakthroughs differ in origin and character. In Egypt, the most visible breakthrough has been institutionally driven from above through constitutional provisions, quotas, and the list system. These measures produced a substantial increase in women's representation, while leaving questions about the autonomy, effectiveness, and sustainability of that representation. In Lebanon, breakthroughs have been more closely linked to civic mobilisation and protest, particularly after the 17 October uprising. They have appeared in increased candidacy, more diverse candidate backgrounds, and the growing prominence of competence and change in political discourse. Their electoral impact has nevertheless remained limited because of the continuing strength of the sectarian system, established parties, influence networks, and unequal resources.

In Jordan, the breakthrough has taken the form of gradual reform combining an expanded quota with a new route into parliament through national party lists. The transition towards party- and

programme-based competition, independent of tribal and local structures, nevertheless remains incomplete. In Iraq, the breakthrough has drawn on multiple sources, including the quota, electoral reforms, protests, and changes in the awareness of some women voters. It has been reflected in women winning seats outside the quota and in the increasing importance of certain performance-based criteria, despite the continuing influence of parties, tribe, family, and sect.

The comparative analysis of Tunisia and Morocco further demonstrates the importance and durability of institutional rules. In Tunisia, political opening and gender parity enabled a major expansion in women's candidacy and representation. The removal of electoral safeguards and the contraction of political space subsequently revealed the fragility of this breakthrough and its failure to develop into a sustainable structural transformation. In Morocco, gradual institutional reform normalised women's participation in electoral politics and increased their representation, but did not eliminate dependence on designated routes or the gap between numerical presence and political influence.

The fieldwork identifies a common trend across the four countries: competence, programmes, and performance are increasingly important criteria for evaluating candidates, while family, tribal, sectarian, and party influences persist. This coexistence suggests that breakthroughs do not occur through the complete replacement of an old pattern by a new one. Rather, they emerge through the diversification of criteria, the expansion of individual choice, and a relative decline in the monopoly of traditional loyalties among certain groups.

Interviews with intermittent voters and abstainers also show that non-voting does not necessarily reflect apathy or withdrawal from politics. Abstention may result from distrust in institutions or electoral integrity, a belief that one's vote has little effect, or dissatisfaction with the available choices. It may also take a critical or protest-oriented form. Addressing abstention therefore requires more than campaigns encouraging voter turnout; it calls for rebuilding trust, demonstrating the value of participation, and ensuring genuine competition and credible political alternatives.

The study concludes that there is no linear or automatic relationship between increased numerical representation and qualitative transformation. A rise in the number of women constitutes an important breakthrough in a pattern of limited presence, but it does not by itself reveal the source or depth of that breakthrough, nor does it guarantee autonomy, effectiveness, or influence. Moving towards qualitative representation requires equitable access to resources and electoral opportunities, internal party democracy, access to leadership positions, protection from political and digital violence, meaningful participation in policymaking and legislation, and opportunities for cooperation on shared issues without assuming the existence of a single women's agenda.

The study accordingly recommends an integrated approach to women's political empowerment linking voting, candidacy, representation, and effectiveness. Electoral systems and quotas should be periodically assessed, numerical gains preserved, and pathways towards more equitable competition strengthened. Political parties should improve their internal democracy and the transparency of candidate selection, expand women's access to leadership, resources, finance, and media, and establish effective mechanisms to confront political, electoral, and digital violence.

The study also calls for an Arab reference framework for political empowerment, indicators measuring the quality of participation beyond numerical representation, and an Arab observatory on women's electoral behaviour and political participation. Empowerment programmes should be adapted to national contexts, while voter education should focus on informed choice, accountability, and the restoration of trust. Sustainable pathways to political leadership, particularly for younger women, should also be supported.

Ultimately, the breakthroughs observed across the Arab world are real but uneven and unstable. They do not yet amount to a comprehensive transformation of electoral behaviour or political representation. Their transition into more deeply rooted change depends on their ability to accumulate, endure, and move from increased candidacy and representation towards changes in electoral criteria, greater autonomy and effectiveness for women, and a redistribution of influence within parties, institutions, and the wider political sphere. The ultimate objective is therefore not merely to increase women's presence within political systems, but to enable them to participate fully in producing political authority, shaping decisions, and redefining the rules and priorities of political life.