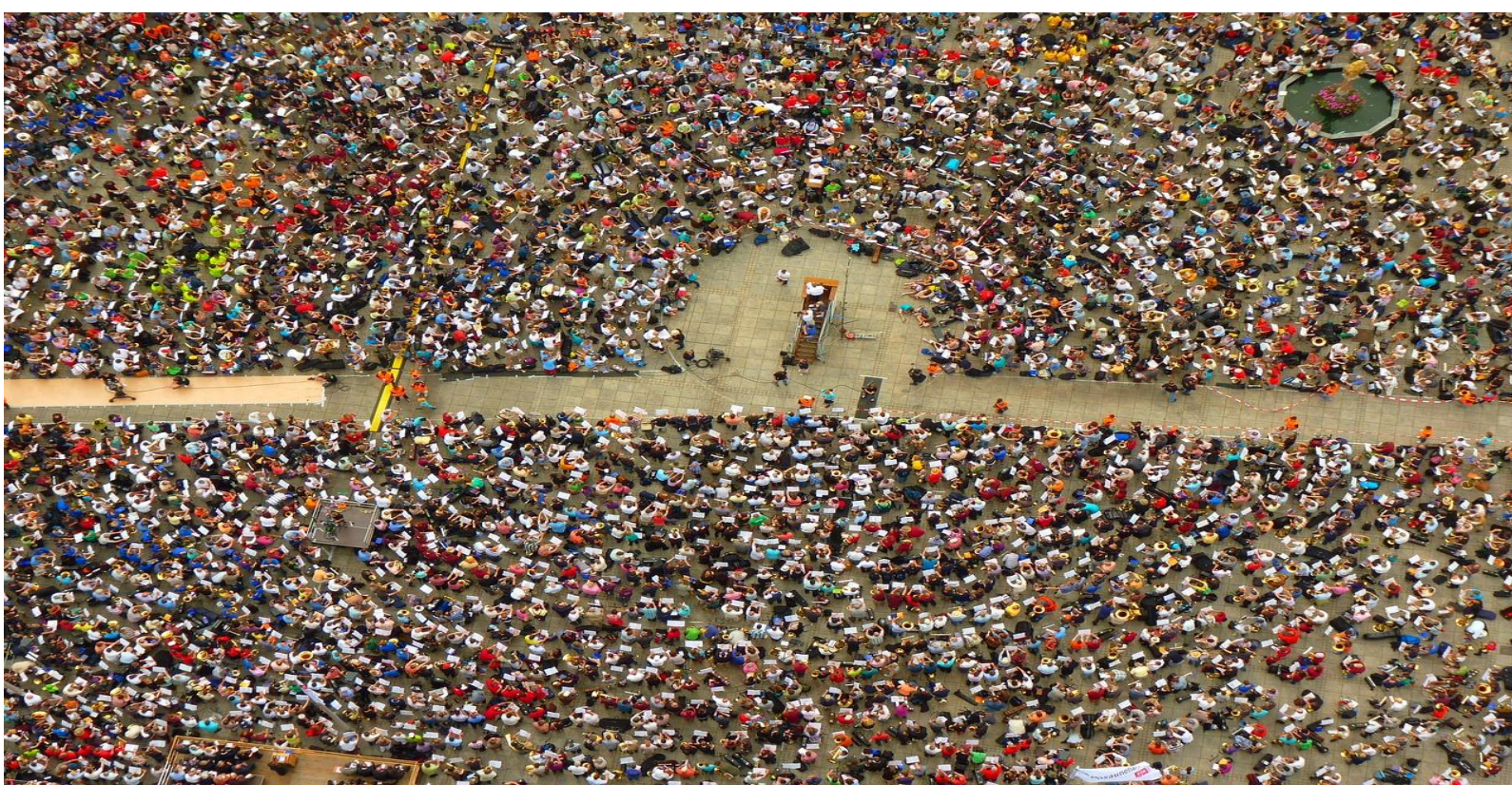


NAVIGATING POPULISM

Women's Struggle for Political Representation

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, there has been an overall increase in the representation of women in political and decision-making positions, although this progress is uneven and uncertain (Fellegi, Hrbková, Dubrow, 2023). Feminists' demands are increasingly heard and supported by institutions, both international and national. However, this progress in women's representation and the defence of women's rights can lead to two phenomena which are detrimental to these causes. Firstly, greater recognition of women's rights can lead to a "backlash" phenomenon, a violent retreat from women's rights in response to this advance. Backlash can be defined as “a response to feminist movements that are effectively making changes to create a more egalitarian and just society” (Bojanic, Abadía, Moro, 2021). Thus, when a backlash occurs in a country, it should be analysed as proof that women's rights initially improved. The backlash phenomenon also highlights the fact that increasing the representation of women in politics does not systematically lead to an improvement in women's rights.

Secondly, the growing importance of feminist demands in the political arena can lead to the instrumentalisation of these demands by political parties. This is particularly true of populist parties. Populism is a political program or movement that claims to represent the common person against an elite or establishment while criticising political representation and everything that mediates between the people and their government (Lacatus, Meibauer, 2022). From Trump in the US, Erdogan in Turkey, Weidel in Germany, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Salvini or Meloni in Italy, and Modi in India, populist leaders around the globe each have unique features but all seem to rely heavily on gendered stereotypes to advance a national strategy that breaks with traditional party politics.

This report questions how political parties instrumentalise women for electoral purposes or to retain power. It will attempt to illustrate the gendered nature of populism and the inherently intertwining themes of societal gendered considerations with populism power politics and its impact on women's political representation and ability to exist in the public sphere. Although global trends and similarities can be observed on an international scale, this report will put forward the specificities of the following geographical areas: Europe, Latin America, Southeast Asia and the Middle East, and North Africa. The intricacies of each area's own historical, political, and social context provide a more comprehensive overview and greatly shape the way populism interacts with women's rights.

1. SELECTIVE FEMINISM IN EUROPE: THE INSTRUMENTALISATION OF FEARS AND THE PROTECTION OF A PERCEIVED NATIONAL CULTURE

Right-wing parties are currently among the strongest in many European countries, often coming first or second in national elections. They have gained substantive traction, reshaping political landscapes and policy discussions. The results of the 2024 European Elections confirm that this trend has shifted from a national to a transnational phenomenon and reveal an increasing number of far-right political parties are gaining greater public support for far-right political movements in European society. The rise of far-right populism in Europe has been marked by the growing influence of parties that blend nationalist rhetoric with populist appeals. Far-right populism is characterised by its “us versus them” mentality, framing the people against the elites, and portraying threats to national identity and sovereignty. Although populism, as it is generally defined, is not an exclusive phenomenon of the right-wing political spectrum, populist characteristics of European parties are particularly evident among the far-right. Thus, these parties are the focus of this chapter (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, n.d.). While the specifics vary by country, there are strong similarities in European populist rhetoric. Far-Right Populist parties claim to represent the will of the ordinary people and oppose the dominance of the elite, which they accuse of governing at the expense of the people and against their will (Köttig et al., 2017; Lazar, 2021; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Representatives of conservative views have spent years constructing narratives that do not reflect reality but are excellent polarising tools for conservative, restrictive political agendas. A prominent example is the concept of “gender ideology ” introduced by the Catholic Church to justify its exclusionary and conservative stance on reproductive and sexual politics (Corredor, 2019). Over the past decade, a particular strategy has emerged across the European political spectrum: the misuse of feminist rhetoric to advance a conservative political agenda. This tactic has predominantly been employed by far-right populist parties, who have increasingly adopted feminist narratives selectively to advance their nationalist and exclusionary agendas (Kisbenedek, 2021). The way populist far-right parties misuse such narratives varies across geographical and cultural regions. The research question guiding this chapter is therefore: How do far-right populist parties in Europe misuse feminist narratives to advance their agenda? Understanding this connection is crucial, as it poses a significant threat to democracy and democratic values. By co-opting feminist rhetoric, far-right parties not only distort the true aims of feminism but also erode the foundations of democratic values and human rights. This research aims to shed light on these manipulative

strategies, highlighting the urgent need for a more nuanced and vigilant approach to defending both gender equality and democratic principles.

1.1 SELECTIVE FEMINISM

1.1.1 Selective Use of Women's Rights and the Nuclear Family

The use of feminist rhetoric by far-right parties often appears contradictory, as they champion women's rights in selective contexts while actually promoting policies that ultimately restrict those very rights. Far-right parties across Europe selectively use women's rights and gender equality narratives primarily as a tool against immigration from Muslim-majority countries and to advance their political agenda. This selective advocacy contrasts with the promotion of traditional gender roles and opposition to progressive gender equality policies such as gender quotas and reproductive rights (Köttig et al., 2017; Mols & Jetten, 2020; Van Raemdonck et al., 2022). In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's rhetoric emphasises the defence of 'Western' cultural values through the lens of women's rights, portraying motherhood as central to national identity. This approach allows Meloni to present herself as a feminist while still reinforcing patriarchal norms (Indelicato & Lopes, 2024).

The selective use of women's rights serves several key functions. First and foremost, it legitimises far-right anti-immigration and anti-Islam policies (Colella, 2021; Indelicato & Lopes, 2024; Van Raemdonck et al., 2022). By framing themselves as protectors of women against the perceived threat of Muslim immigrants, these parties aim to attract voters concerned about gender equality while reinforcing xenophobic and exclusionary ideologies. Furthermore, far-right parties use feminist rhetoric to appeal to a wider audience, including women who may be attracted to their perceived progressive stance on gender issues (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022; Rahbari, 2021). For example, Marine Le Pen's National Rally (RN) in France uses feminist themes to position the party against perceived threats from immigrant communities and to portray itself as a defender of secularism and women's rights (Serdar et al., 2023).

Despite their feminist rhetoric, far-right parties often reinforce traditional gender norms. The promotion of traditional family values and gender complementarity is a common theme with women seen as caregivers, mothers and, more generally, reproducers of the nation (Colella, 2021; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022; Heinemann, 2022). This approach aims to preserve the perceived cultural heritage and social stability of these parties, while actually perpetuating a patriarchal, oppressive social structure. The threat factors usually depend on the narrative they promote, scapegoating different groups for different purposes (De Giorgi et

al., 2023; Rahbari, 2021; Sprengholz, 2021; Van Raemdonck et al., 2022). The AfD, for example, rejects gender-sensitive policies, wants to make abortion illegal and to end gender research altogether. It advocates a return to traditional family structures as essential for social stability, while describing liberal sex education in schools as ideological indoctrination and a threat to the cherished traditional family (AfD, 2016; Sprengholz, 2021). The Swiss People's Party (SVP) opposes any state influence on parental responsibilities, such as financial support for childcare, by claiming to fight discrimination against people without children (Akkerman, 2015; SVP, n.d.). Similarly, far-right movements in Nordic countries emphasise traditional family values to position the 'gender equal' native majority as superior to 'patriarchal' immigrant and religious minorities, thereby reinforcing exclusionary nationalist ideologies and creating barriers for marginalised groups (Norocel & Pettersson, 2022). Another prominent example is Hungary's Fidesz leader Victor Orbán, who has embedded Christianity in the Hungarian constitution to justify homophobic and heteronormative policies by presenting the nuclear family - mother, father, and child - as the cornerstone of national preservation (Máté-Tóth & Rakovics, 2023; Pivarnyk, 2018). Orbán frequently emphasises women's responsibility for national preservation, reinforcing traditional roles that reduce women to their reproductive functions (Pivarnyk, 2018). To promote this vision, he offers financial incentives such as generous child benefits and early retirement for mothers with multiple children (Horvath, 2023). However, these family-friendly policies fail to address the different financial needs of families and disproportionately benefit the wealthy. Furthermore, these benefits are often tax-related and apply to one parent, usually the father, exacerbating the financial vulnerability of mothers (Pivarnyk, 2018). In the absence of comprehensive support such as childcare services, these measures are not truly feminist or supportive of women, but rather nationalist efforts disguised as family support (Bajnay, 2022). Similarly, Marine Le Pen proposed lowering the retirement age for women with at least three children. Not only does this again reduce the value of women to their mere function as reproducers, but her proposal only refers to families with at least one parent of French nationality, promoting an exclusionary agenda (Akkerman, 2015).

Some right-wing groups in Europe, particularly in the West and North, have strategically supported LGBTQIA+ rights through discourses of gender and sexual equality in order to distinguish between 'us' and 'them', with us being progressive Europeans and them being racialised others (Norocel & Giorgi, 2022; Van Raemdonck, 2022). In many cases, however, they have promoted exclusionary practices and reinforced heteronormative norms, promoting a narrative of social order and stability outside the anti-immigration discourse. In this context, they support the restriction of women's rights and the marginalisation of LGBTQIA+ communities within European societies, despite presenting themselves as defenders of the family and claiming an interest in defending gender equality (Heinemann & Stern, 2022; Norocel & Giorgi, 2022). For example, the AfD, whose top candidate Alice Weidel is openly gay, has campaigned against gendered language, wants to end gender

research, and described the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Germany in 2017 as the end of the German family (AfD, 2016; Treeck, 2017). The very fact that all these parties position themselves as 'protectors of women' rather than, for example, protectors of marginalised groups, proves that the LGBTQIA+ community is not included or intended to be protected, but is rather instrumentalised within the anti-immigration discourse.

1.1.2 Women in Leadership Positions

While populist far-right parties may selectively advocate for gender equality and women's rights in their rhetoric, the actual representation of women in leadership positions within these parties is often limited (Akkerman, 2015). However, the presence of women in leadership positions within far-right parties is becoming increasingly prominent (Caiani & Rosa, 2024; Dombrowski, 2024). Beata Szydło (PiS), Marine Le Pen (RN), Pia Kjaersgaard (DF), Alice Weidel (AfD), and Ildikó Pelczné Gáll (Fidesz) are notable examples. In a political landscape traditionally dominated by men, these women play a key role.

Female leaders in far-right parties often serve as strategic tools to improve the party's image and broaden its appeal (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Heinemann & Stern, 2022; Sprengholz, 2021; Serdar et al., 2023). For example, Giorgia Meloni and Marine Le Pen have both used their positions to present their parties as defenders of women's rights, despite promoting conservative policies. Meloni exemplifies this duality by balancing toughness with traditional femininity, portraying herself as an ordinary Italian mother concerned about national issues (De Giorgi et al., 2023; Rahbari, 2021). Le Pen similarly uses her gender to appeal to female voters, projecting her party as inclusive and progressive (Akkerman, 2015).

Another notable role of female leaders in far-right parties is their ability to embody and project the 'mother of the nation' archetype, which resonates with traditional gender roles while presenting a tough, populist image (Indelicato & Lopes, 2024). To appeal to a broader constituency, these leaders use gender stereotypes to create a sense of unity and solidarity among supporters who prioritise traditional values and cultural heritage (Dietze & Roth, 2020). They support the strategic presentation of these parties as defenders of women and families within a framework that upholds gender essentialism and promotes a specific vision of women's role as reproducers (Heinemann, 2022).

The presence of female leaders also serves to challenge and reshape public perceptions of far-right parties. By positioning women in visible leadership roles, these parties can deflect accusations of sexism and extremism and thus appear softer, more moderate and inclusive (Radke & Rolofs, 2023; Sprengholz, 2021; Serdar et al., 2023). For example, the AfD employs female leaders to project a facade of gender equality and diversity,

despite advocating policies that undermine these values (Heinemann, 2022). Similarly, Anne-Marie Waters of the UK's For Britain party uses her identity to present the party as inclusive of LGBTQ+ people, despite its far-right ideologies (Foster & Kirke, 2023).

However, the authenticity of these feminist narratives is often questionable. Female leaders in far-right parties may rhetorically champion women's rights, while their policies reinforce traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures. This discrepancy highlights the instrumentalisation of feminist language to legitimise exclusionary ideologies and gain wider support (Rahbari, 2021). For example, while promoting traditional family structures, these leaders often reject progressive feminist movements, framing their stance as a defence of stability and continuity (Heinemann & Stern, 2022). The impact of female leadership within far-right parties extends to their strategic use of feminist narratives to advance nationalist and anti-immigration agendas. By intertwining gender equality discourses with exclusionary policies, female leaders can appeal to conservative and nationalist sentiments by presenting their policies as necessary measures to protect women's rights against perceived external threats (Van Raemdonck et al., 2022).

Consequently, the role of women in leadership positions within far-right parties in Europe is complex and strategically significant. While their presence can enhance the party's image, attract diverse supporters and project a veneer of progressiveness, it also raises critical questions about the authenticity of their feminist narratives and underlying motives. Female leaders in these parties often walk a fine line between promoting traditional values and using gender equality discourse to advance nationalist and exclusionary agendas. This interplay of gender, power, and ideology highlights the nuanced dynamics of female leadership in far-right movements and its broader implications for gender politics and societal perceptions.

1.2 THE PROTECTION NARRATIVE

Within the far right's misuse of feminist narratives, the protection narrative is particularly prominent in almost all parties. As noted above, these parties present themselves as defenders of women's rights in order to justify their xenophobic and anti-immigrant agendas. This second section of the chapter examines two aspects of the protection narrative in more detail. First, it shows how parties portray themselves as protectors of women in order to mobilise against immigration. It then examines how this narrative is used to promote polarisation against Muslim men and Muslim culture by emphasising and defending the cultural identity of their respective countries.

1.2.1 Women's Safety

A key feminist narrative used by far-right parties is the protection of native women (Dietze & Roth, 2020; Foster & Kirke, 2023; Rahbari, 2021). These parties frame their anti-immigrant and xenophobic stance as a feminist responsibility. By claiming that immigrants, particularly men from Muslim-majority countries, pose a threat to the safety and rights of women in Europe, they position this group as a fundamental danger. In contrast, they present themselves as the national protectors of women against these alleged threats (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022).

The AfD frequently exploits isolated cases of sexual assault, such as the New Year's Eve incident in Cologne in 2015, to claim that Muslim immigrants endanger the safety of German women. The AfD specifically links the 'German culture of welcome' to a reckless security risk for German women, which the government is supposedly willing to accept. This narrative is used to call for stricter immigration controls and to position the AfD as a defender of women (Sprengholz, 2021; Weisskircher, 2020). However, statistics from the German Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) do not support this claim, showing instead that in recent years crimes have been committed more often by Germans than by non-Germans (BKA, 2024A, 2024B). The Sweden Democrats (SD) use a similar tactic, using cases of sexual violence allegedly committed by immigrants to justify restrictive immigration policies (Chrisafis et al., 2019). In a speech, party leader Åkesson boldly stated that Swedish women no longer feel safe due to increased sexual violence by immigrants, linking the concept of foreigners to rape. He confidently juxtaposed vulnerable Swedish women with hyper-sexualised foreign criminals and criticised the Swedish legal system for failing to deal with them. Once again, the party portrayed itself as the guardian of Swedish women against the threat posed by non-European immigrants, especially Muslims (Norocel & Pettersson, 2022). This stance is again contradicted by official Swedish crime statistics (Reuters Fact Check, 2023).

These are largely transnational discursive strategies and ideological constructions of danger and security that are not supported by facts and empirical evidence. Parties highlight crimes committed by immigrants to deliberately create a sense of urgency and fear around immigration issues. These parties present themselves as the only political forces willing to take these concerns seriously and protect women from perceived dangers (Christafis et al., 2019; Sprengholz, 2021). Furthermore, these narratives serve to reinforce xenophobic and racist stereotypes about migrant communities and immigration. They promote stricter immigration controls and exclusionary, xenophobic policies under the guise of women's safety. These arguments, however, do not protect communities, but fuel prejudice, xenophobia, and fear.

1.2.2 Defence of a Cultural Heritage and National Values

A second narrative within the protection framework used by far-right parties is the defence of national values and cultures (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022; Kováts, 2021; Möser et al., 2022; Rahbari, 2021). In particular, they emphasise modern, progressive gender norms and claim that their national culture is threatened by immigrants who do not share these cultural values (Norocel & Giorgi, 2022; Norocel & Petterson, 2022). These parties argue that the influx of migrants threatens the homogeneity of the native population and the preservation of the national, progressive culture (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022; Heinemann, 2022). They claim that these cultures are inherently different from their national culture and therefore threaten the cultural extinction of their nation (Norocel & Giorgi, 2022). They instrumentalise cultural differences as evidence of oppression, particularly of women and other groups. They use the preservation of national identity, traditions, and cultural heritage as a cover for their xenophobic and racist views. However, party programmes, official documents, or speeches reveal conservative and exclusionary views (Akkerman, 2015).

In France, for example, Marine Le Pen's RN often emphasises the incompatibility of Islamic values with French liberal democratic values. She uses the principle of *laïcité* (secularism) to argue against the visibility of Muslim practices, such as the wearing of the hijab in public spaces. Le Pen criticises Islamic practices as an oppressive intrusion into the secular sphere while promoting traditional French values, using Christianity as an identity marker to distinguish between 'us' and 'them' (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022; Serdar et al., 2023). To argue against Muslim culture, she intertwines Christianity and secularism to shape understandings of French culture and women's rights. However, the support for women's rights within this cultural heritage is merely a selective framing to propagate anti-Islamic and xenophobic attitudes. Similarly, the SD in Sweden instrumentalises its supposed Christian identity as a means of promoting the nuclear family and arguing against gender equality beyond the binary. At the same time it uses this identity to create a divide between 'the people' itself by differentiating between 'authentic people' as the "gender-equal native [Swedish] ethnic majority" (Serdar et al., 2023, p.7) and 'non-People' as the allegedly deeply patriarchal "immigrants, minorities, LGBTQ or political opponents" (Serdar et al., 2023, p.2). The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), on the other hand, used the veil as evidence of an aversion to integration in an election campaign in 2008 (Akkerman, 2015). A similar tendency can be seen in Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far-right populist party Lega in Italy. Salvini has also popularised the idea that multiculturalism, particularly the influence of Islamic culture, introduces misogynistic practices into national culture. Again, the supposed defence of women's rights is used to argue against multicultural policies. Similarly, Denmark's Dansk Folkeparti (DF) constructs Islam as backward and threatening, trying to

create the image that this culture especially wants to deprive women and other marginalised groups of their free will, thus presenting a clear contrast to Danish culture (Awad et al., 2022). Pia Kjærsgaard highlighted this incompatibility in her 2001 parliamentary speech, in which she emphasised Danish culture as the only culture of Denmark (Krell et al., 2018).

1.3 CONCLUSION

Right-wing parties across Europe often argue that the needs of their respective national cultures and national homogeneity are under threat and need to be protected or saved. However, the oppression of women and marginalised groups cannot be attributed to any particular group or country; it is a core element of patriarchal systems worldwide. The 'othering' strategy employed by right-wing parties serves to distinguish between 'us' and 'them' and to subtly absolve their own countries of responsibility, shifting the focus away from the critical need to challenge and reform their own cultural structures of oppression. If the real concern were the security of citizens, these parties would examine their own role in perpetuating such structures in European countries. In discussing the preservation of national cultures, the question arises as to which aspects of these cultures are deemed worthy of preservation. Right-wing parties seem to be particularly focused on preserving structures rooted in patriarchal, conservative, and outdated values (Akkermann, 2015; De Giorgi et al., 2023; Lazardis & Campani, 2017; Kováts, 2021; Vieten, 2016). These values do not require one to look beyond one's own doorstep to identify sources of oppression. An examination of right-wing rhetoric across Europe reveals a consistent pattern: these parties' efforts to promote security and equality do not extend to critical self-reflection, as they advocate the preservation of cultural elements that perpetuate oppression. As a result, the supposed efforts of right-wing parties to ensure security serve primarily to create a climate of fear and to advance structurally hateful, racist, and exclusionary agendas.

Contrary to the right-wing narrative, national cultures in Europe have always been subject to change. Cultural exchange and an international community have been an integral part of European cultures and their development. This exchange has enriched each country and fostered its cultural and social progress through cooperation and diversity. Europe's ability to absorb and integrate diverse influences is a source of pride and a testament to its dynamic cultural heritage. Ultimately, the protectionist narratives of right-wing parties fail to recognise the inherent and historical fluidity of national cultures. Instead, they seek to preserve structures that perpetuate oppression, exploiting fear and exclusion by scapegoating particular social groups to further their agenda. However, the true enrichment of national cultures lies in embracing change and diversity, fostering an inclusive and progressive society.

2. POPULIST INSTRUMENTALISATION OF WOMEN AND FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN LATIN AMERICA

Particularly in Latin America, many populist leaders have flourished with significant global resonance.¹ Latin America is also known for the importance and vigour of its feminist movements.² Consequently, the struggle for women's rights has been instrumentalised by populists on both sides of the political spectrum, a use which has been strongly criticised. In addition to this, the denunciation of “gender ideology” by Latin American right-wing parties is a recurrent electoral argument. Feminist issues are also instrumentalised in the fight against violence. However, certain feminist demands can federate the political struggle and open up spaces of politicisation for women. Demands for legalising abortion and the fight against femicide are edifying examples of this.

2.1. THE INSTRUMENTALISATION OF FEMINISM BY POPULISTS ON THE RIGHT AND LEFT

Whether on the left or the right, populist parties in Latin America are helping to reinforce gender roles. In recent years, the rise of populism in the region and the advance of feminist ideas have led to a contradictory phenomenon: the development of a left-wing populism that assumes an essentialising discourse, and a right-wing populism that claims to be “true” feminism, as opposed to a feminism that is allegedly instrumentalised (Esparanza Casullo, 2019).

2.1.1 Women as Guardians of the Traditional Family in Right-Wing Populism

Although they are predominantly anti-feminist, Latin American right-wing populist parties may appear to be pro-women to some extent (Roth, 2020). They claim certain rights for women, but not universally: they defend only the women “of their own community”, thus promoting an exclusive solidarity (Dingler, Lefkofridi, Marent, 2017). Female support for Bolsonaro during his 2018 campaign sheds light on these mechanisms: in his speeches, the

¹ Juan Perón marked Argentina's history as a charismatic leader and central figure of populism in the first half of the 20th century. Hugo Chávez embodied populism in Venezuela during the 1990s and 2000s, founding the Bolivarian movement, inspired by the ideas of statesman Simon Bolívar, and implementing a socialist political and economic model. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, often nicknamed “AMLO”, is a current populist leader in Mexico. More recently, in December 2023, Javier Milei was elected President of Argentina on the basis of a populist and libertarian programme.

² The green scarf for the right to abortion or Ni Una Menos, the campaign against gender-based violence.

candidate constantly contrasted “correct and respectable” right-wing women with left-wing women and feminists, whom he described as “dirty” and “vulgar” (Kaiser, 2018).

Moreover, right-wing populist parties regard family and reproductive policies as a key issue of their politics. As such, some measures may seem to target women, especially mothers, but most populist measures ultimately seriously undermine women’s rights and health. However, some women may be attracted by the valorisation of their role as mothers and “guardians of family values”. This special position may explain why right-wing populist parties claim to defend women’s rights (Esparanza Casullo, 2019).

2.1.2 Women as Devoted and Sacrificial Mothers in Left-Wing Populism

Left-wing populism has emerged in Latin America as an alternative to the rise of right-wing populism. It seeks to “play the populist game” in a political context that is increasingly favourable to populism. While left-wing populism may appear more favourable to women’s rights, it nonetheless contributes to the construction of a stereotyped image of women. Latin American left-wing populist parties are imbued with a “maternalist” ideology that invests women with virtuous moral characteristics based primarily on their role as mothers. They demand that women show self-sacrifice and give up their personal ambitions and self-fulfilment to devote themselves to the well-being of those around them. Women are also presented as agents of economic development and leaders of their communities. (Dingler, Lefkofridi, Marent, 2017, p.350). While these characteristics may seem valorising, this ideology participates in an essentialisation of women, sometimes without any real understanding of feminist issues.

Many Latin American feminist activists maintain that populism, even on the left, ends up reinforcing the patriarchal system (Roth, Baird, 2017). Indeed, while left-wing populist regimes may genuinely enable the advancement of certain rights for women, their base remains imbued with values contrary to those of feminism. Populism constructs the “us” in opposition to the “them”, which goes against an inclusive vision of society. This “us”, representing “the people”, obscures the latter’s diversity and reinforces the predominant identity (white, male, heterosexual). Similarly, populism emphasises strong, personalised, and almost always masculine or masculinised leadership. Conversely, feminism encourages horizontality, mutual aid, and teamwork. These values go against the very foundation of populism (Palop, 2016).

2.2 REJECTION OF “GENDER IDEOLOGY” AS AN ELECTORAL ARGUMENT

Ever since the category of “gender” appeared in United Nations (UN) texts in the 1990s, the term has been the subject of great controversy in Latin America.³ While it has gradually gained a foothold in public policymaking, criticism of its use has become an electoral argument for the reactionary right.

2.2.1 “Gender Ideology” and the Weight of Religion

In some political discourses, the denunciation of “gender ideology” is framed in terms of religious considerations. During the 2018 Brazilian presidential campaign, Jair Bolsonaro described himself as an “anti-gender crusader”, defending the traditional family and Christian values. The term “crusader” underscores the religious and cultural warfare Bolsonaro is waging, his political career also being founded on this struggle. In 2011, when Brazil was facing alarming rates of violent deaths linked to homophobia, then Education Minister Fernando Haddad launched an initiative to distribute educational materials to combat homophobia and discrimination in schools. Bolsonaro called these materials a “gay kit” and said they were a direct threat to the “natural” sexual binary, children, and the Brazilian family. Following this campaign, then-President Dilma Rousseff vetoed the distribution of these documents, depriving the country of an ambitious anti-discrimination policy (Assis, Ogando, 2018).

Similarly, in Mexico, supporters of the “National Front for the Family” used the rhetoric of “gender ideology” to oppose the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2016. They claimed that the development of gender ideology would lead to the teaching of “sexual practices” in schools. Mexican researcher Gloria Careaga-Pérez calls these speeches against “gender ideology” a moral panic, aimed at demonising women and homosexuals (Careaga-Pérez, 2016). She points out that the “crusade” against “gender ideology” has spread throughout Latin America, fuelled by the resurgence of conservative Catholic opposition and the rise of Pentecostal groups.

2.2.2 “Gender Ideology” as “Ideological Colonisation”: Reverse Anti-Colonialism

This rejection of gender ideology is sometimes falsely linked to an anti-colonial struggle. For some “anti-gender” activists in Latin America, gender is a concept that the West wishes to impose on the entire planet, with the aim of cultural colonisation. They base their position on the words of Pope Francis, who in 2015, during a tour of Sri Lanka and the

³ The term “gender” was first mentioned at the UN conference in Cairo in 1994, then in 1995 at the Beijing conference.

Philippines, publicly addressed “families”, asking them to be “attentive to the new ideological colonisation [...] that seek to destroy the family”. He then cited an episode in Argentina, claiming that the Minister of Education had managed to secure a loan to build schools for the poor, on condition that he included in the curriculum “a textbook in which gender ideology was taught” (Vatican, 2015). The Pope concluded by asserting that the textbook was part of a strategy of ideological colonisation, as it brought foreign ideas to a people with the aim of changing their mentality. This argument has been taken up by many conservative politicians to justify the rejection of policies in favour of women and gender minorities.

Thus, “the expression 'gender ideology' has become an effective means of branding and disqualifying militantism that seeks to transform the gender and sexual hierarchies that define masculinity and heterosexuality as privileged references in the construction of the world” (Rodríguez Rondón, 2017). The link between criticism of this “gender ideology” and the implementation of a political project unfavourable to women is therefore beyond doubt.

2.3 THE INSTRUMENTALISATION OF FEMINISM IN THE FIGHT AGAINST VIOLENCE

As in other parts of the world, the fight against violence against women is instrumentalised in some Latin American countries to justify xenophobic measures or policies of social repression. Political parties campaigning on issues of insecurity and urban violence use feminism as an argument to strengthen police power and toughen prison sentences, as seen in Argentina.

2.3.1 Feminism as a Justification for Xenophobia and Police Repression

In 2018, the mayor of Buenos Aires, Rodríguez Larreta, sent the city's Legislative Assembly a bill using the fight against gender-based violence as an excuse to step up the criminalisation of street workers, such as itinerant window washers. It explicitly invoked feminism to justify more violent repression of these precarious workers, often of foreign origin (LATFEM, 2018). Taking up the feminist denunciation of street harassment, he implied that repression of precarious men was the solution to this problem. But he had no desire to really understand and address street harassment. By using a feminist vocabulary, he wanted to make his repressive measures difficult to challenge.

Similarly, the fight against violence against women is falsely used to justify police violence. For example, in November 2015, a young man, Lucas Cabello, was murdered by a police officer during a traffic stop. The deputy head of government at the time, María Eugenia

Vidal, justified the incident by linking it to gender-based violence. Remaining deliberately vague about the reality of the case, she claimed that the police officer's action was intended to defend a woman who was "at risk of becoming a victim of gender violence". By using this specific vocabulary without really giving any details, she hoped to win the support of opinion, which was more likely to approve or excuse the police officer's action in this context. At the officer's trial, this accusation was completely refuted, and he was convicted of "racial killing" (Rodriguez, 2019). However, the ease with which this argument against gender-based violence was used to justify a police crime shows just how deeply rooted this line of reasoning is in Argentine society.

2.3.2 Feminist Critique of the Penal System in Latin America

Faced with this instrumentalisation of their struggle by political parties with no real interest in protecting them, many feminists in Latin America are developing a critical approach to the penal system and the police. Left-wing feminist groups have argued that the punitive strategy has proved ineffective in the fight against violence against women. Without calling into question the fundamental right of every woman to obtain justice before the courts, these feminists criticise the hypocrisy of laws designed to protect women victims of violence. They argue that such laws only result in increased repression of the working classes, while being ineffective in combating gender-based violence (D'Atri, 2018).

Andrea D'Atri, founder of the Argentinian collective "Pan y Rosas" writes that *the patriarchal and capitalist state, while recognising women as victims and multiplying punitive norms, not only revictimises them in police stations, prosecutor's offices and courts, but is incapable of preventing femicide with basic measures such as building sufficient shelters for victims, granting cheap loans for access to one's own home [...]* (D'Atri, 2018).⁴

Feminist activists in Argentina have strongly denounced the strategy of using feminism as an instrument to toughen police and penal repression.

2.4 THE FEDERATION OF WOMEN FOR LEGALISATION OF ABORTION AND THE FIGHT AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The scale and radicalism of feminist mobilisations in Latin America are inspiring feminist activists the world over. These mobilisations have enabled Latin American women to

⁴ Pan y Rosas is a feminist organisation originating from Argentina. The group belongs to the socialist feminist movement.

join forces to fight against societal projects that oppress them. In this way, they resist the instrumentalisation of their demands by populist parties.

2.4.1 Mobilisation Strategies that Demonstrate Women's Political Strength

Feminist activists in Latin America have developed powerful mobilisation strategies. The *pañuelo verde* (green scarf) has become the symbol of contemporary Latin American feminism. Born in Argentina in 2003, the “green tide” of activists for the right to legal, safe, and free abortion has spread across the continent and around the world (Martin, 2020). This campaign explicitly links legal abortion with several other demands, such as sex education and contraception. It draws its strength from the history of women's activism in Argentina since it is directly inspired by the white scarves worn by the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.⁵ This mobilisation has created a striking, unifying visual symbol (Daby, Moseley, 2021). Wearing this green scarf is a call to revolt for women's rights.

The global impact of the “Un violador en tu camino” (A rapist on your way) campaign illustrates the place of women's bodies in the struggle. This is a performance created by a Chilean feminist collective called Lastesis, to denounce feminicide and sexual violence. Since 2019, the performance has been reproduced in nearly three hundred cities on every continent. The campaigners use their bodies as tools of activism and a place of resistance overturning the injunctions of a patriarchal society (Ortiz Cadena, 2021). The performance consists of synchronised dance and chanted text. The activists are blindfolded to represent the ignorance of the state and its institutions in the matter of violence against women. During the choreography, the activists point fingers at those responsible for the oppression of women. The strength of this performance is that it not only denounces the structural violence against women that exists throughout the world, but it also demands swift and concrete action. The Lastesis collective, for example, staged this performance in November 2019 in front of the offices of the Chilean Ministry of Women and Gender Equity to demand the resignation of Minister Isabel Plá, who has been accused of failing to take clear action against violations of women's rights during the protests (Cabrera, 2019).

2.4.2 Between Institutional Demands and Revolt Against the State

Feminist mobilisations in Latin America combine calls for institutional reform with more radical demands against the state. The struggle against feminicide in Mexico illustrates this tension. In 2020, at least 975 women were killed in Mexico because of their gender. Huge

⁵ The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo was a movement of Argentine women who demonstrated peacefully to demand the truth about their family members who disappeared during the dictatorship. They gathered in the Plaza de Mayo, a public square located in front of the Casa Rosada presidential palace. They wore white scarves to symbolise the nappies of their missing children, giving an immediately identifiable aspect to their struggle.

demonstrations have been organised in recent years to denounce the state's failure to protect women. As Amnesty International reports real “impunity for these crimes” in Mexico (Amnesty international, 2021), some activists are calling for a major new law to combat feminicide, which would introduce reforms to the penal code and the workings of the judiciary (Núñez, 2020).

However, some Mexican feminists are critical of the Mexican state's ability to respond effectively to these demands. The violent police repression of feminist protests in Mexico has reinforced this distrust of the state (Amnesty International, 2021). The criticism of Claudia Sheinbaum's election by many Mexican feminist activists illustrates this scepticism. In June 2024, she became Mexico's first female president. While Claudia Sheinbaum was presented as a hope for the fight for women's rights, Mexican feminist activists pointed to her role in the violent repression of anti-feminist protests when she was mayor of Mexico City (Beyer Velez, 2024). As a result, many Mexican activists place no hope in the state but advocate alternative defence solutions. The feminist anarchist group "el bloque negro" illustrates this desire for self-management and empowerment in the face of a state that fails to protect women. This Mexican group occupied an institutional building to transform it into a shelter for women victims of violence. Renamed "Casa de Refugio Ni Una Menos" ("Refuge - Not One Less"), the building is strictly off-limits to men and government officials (Wattenbarger, 2020).

3. SOUTHEAST ASIA: FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN POSTCOLONIAL LANDSCAPE

Feminism in Southeast Asia (SA) is aptly framed within the early 20th-century context when women began to play active roles in anti-colonial movements and nationalist struggles. In countries like Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, women fought alongside men for independence, laying the groundwork for their subsequent demands for gender equality.

Indeed, feminism in SA is deeply marked by the oppressive power of colonisation, which has left a heavy burden of history and unresolved trauma of violence. For centuries, this has relegated women to the status of secondary citizens in modern society. However, prior to colonisation, the rise of centralised states, and the spread of religions, Southeast Asian societies were characterised by the relatively favourable position of women in contrast to South or East Asian neighbours. Daughters were not seen as financial burdens because of the practice of bride price, with married couples frequently living with or near the wife's parents, as women held prominent roles in indigenous rituals. Their labour was also essential in agriculture, and they dominated local markets.

Significant progress has been made in women's rights since those times. For instance, obtaining professional skills and academic qualifications is now much more accessible for women. In Brunei, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, there are more female than male graduates, and in Vietnam and Indonesia the rates are nearly equal. The expansion of education has contributed to the growth of female-oriented Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) since the 1980s, providing women with the knowledge and organisational skills to advocate for various issues. Today, as Bell Hooks (2000) writes, feminists in the Southeast Asian region—which has a history of racial violence—distinctively address not only gender but also ethnicity, religion, class, culture, and skin colour as analytical categories for understanding gender inequality and inequity.

However, SA's political landscape still remains skewed in favour of men. Even as women manage to enter the political arena and their chances of holding public office have increased, they often find themselves marginalised within a male-dominated culture. Real power frequently remains in the hands of men, especially in governments where religious and populist ideologies are predominant.

3.1 UNDERSTANDING SOUTHEAST ASIA'S HYPERMASCULINIST LEADERSHIP

3.1.1 The Predominance of Traditional Gender Norms and Family Structures

In SA, the predominance of hypermasculinist leadership is deeply intertwined with traditional gender norms and family structures. The legacy of colonialism, combined with entrenched cultural and religious practices, has reinforced a patriarchal system that privileges male leadership while often marginalising women.

According to Professor Robert Dayley (2016), traditional gender norms strongly shape family dynamics in Southeast Asia, influencing how power is distributed within households. Women are typically assigned the majority of household responsibilities such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare, while men are viewed as the head of family, decision-makers, and primary providers. Despite increasing numbers of women pursuing higher education and entering the workforce, leading to more frequent questioning of those assigned roles, traditional gender norms persist at the workplace with women often facing harassment and discrimination, continuing to create barriers to equality. For instance, women in SA earn on average between 30 percent and 40 percent less than men, according to Asian Development Bank figures (Friedrich Naumann Foundation For Freedom, 2017). In economically disadvantaged regions and countries, issues such as prostitution and human trafficking also remain prevalent (Asia Society, n.d.).

Moreover, religious teachings and cultural traditions continue to reinforce gender stereotypes that favour male leadership. For instance, in some Buddhist communities, rebirth as a woman is seen as a consequence of lesser merit. Vietnam, influenced by its strong Confucian heritage, exhibits a notable preference for sons, reflected in its decision, along Laos, not to sign the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Additionally, stricter interpretations of Islamic dress and behaviour codes have also emerged over the past decades, further limiting women's public roles (Asia Society, n.d.).

3.1.2 Impact on Women's Fundamental Rights and Freedoms

In SA, the pre-existing discriminatory social norms significantly affect women's fundamental rights and freedoms. Men predominantly occupy grassroots political positions and legislative roles, shaping laws and policies that often fail to consider or actively undermine women's rights. Issues of birth control, abortion, and controversial hijab issues in some countries are examples of the impacts of the silencing of women and the denial of their right to self-determination by the state and society (Swastika, 2023, p.180).

For example, access to contraception and safe abortion services is severely restricted in several Southeast Asian countries, especially in the religious and populist Philippines, limiting women's ability to make decisions about their own bodies. These restrictions not only impede women's health and autonomy but also perpetuate gender inequality by reinforcing the notion that women's primary role is reproductive. In Indonesia, the influence of conservative Islamic groups has led to increased regulation of women's dress and behaviour, with laws enforcing modest dress codes. Human Rights Watch (HRW) has reported that "girls who don't comply have been forced to leave school or have withdrawn under pressure, while female civil servants have lost their jobs or resigned to escape constant demands to conform" (HRW, 2021). Additionally, HRW has documented cases where Christian and other non-Muslim students and teachers were also compelled to wear the *jilbab*.

However, a study from the Lowy Institute (2022) has found that gender parity does not equate to gender equality. For instance, the Philippines is considered one of the most dangerous places in Asia for women (The Asean Post, 2020) due to poorly enforced or ignored harassment and assault laws, but ranked 17th out of 156 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2021. On the contrary, Singapore is ranked 101 out of 144 countries for women's political empowerment, but is viewed as the safest place for women to live in the Asia-Pacific region (SBS Indonesian, 2019). This rating is attributed to stringent laws protecting women from sexual violence and domestic abuse, as well as excellent access for women to high-quality healthcare, family planning, and sexual education. Thus, closing gender gaps is not enough to improve women's rights. According to the Lowy Institute,

harmful gender stereotypes and biases, which remain region-wide, must be tackled. These persistent beliefs and gender norms reinforce patriarchal values, which continue to diminish women and limit their opportunities, personal safety, autonomy, and ability to fulfil their potential (2022).

3.2 POPULISM, FEMINISM, AND FAR-RIGHT AGENDAS

As observed, SA's entrenched social norms often uphold patriarchal structures and prioritise male leadership. This dynamic can pose a unique challenge for feminist movements in the region, as populist rhetoric may exploit these traditional values to reinforce conservative agendas, further endangering women's rights.

3.2.1 Populism: Leveraging Class Appeal for Authoritarian and Hypermasculinist Control

Autocratic-leaning populists in SA use similar strategies as those in other regions: they position themselves as outsiders who represent a morally good force, claiming to be the saviours of “the people” against the perceived failures and corruption of “the elites”. They would offer brutal approaches to crime and target vulnerable groups within societies (Kurlantzick, 2018). However, unlike their counterparts in Europe and North America who often emphasise issues like immigration, economic decline, and trade imbalances, Southeast Asian populists operate in a context where these are not the leading political issue: the Philippines is a main source of migrants, with a significant proportion of its citizens working abroad, and economic growth rates in SA remain relatively robust.

Instead, Southeast Asian populists focus on religious and ethnic divides, anti-drug trafficking measures, and appealing to lower socioeconomic classes who “have become frustrated with democracy because they believe democratic politicians have not tackled inequality, addressed crime, or delivered effective state services” (Kurlantzick, 2018). The Philippines’ President Rodrigo Duterte’s administration is a prime example, with a strong emphasis on an anti-drug campaign and a tough-on-crime stance. During his 2016 campaign, the then-mayor of Davao City truthfully admitted that “he was not going to be gentle with ‘criminality in general and drug lords in particular’ and that his presidency might turn violent” (European Center for Populism Studies, 2020). Nevertheless, Duterte continues to enjoy substantial political support, with trust in him reaching 91 percent. His success lies in his ability to resonate with the masses, including women. Indeed, Duterte’s strategy involves positioning himself as the “president of all classes” (Juego, 2017), effectively bridging his “anti-elite” rhetoric and the perception that his administration’s economic policies are “anti-poor”. Instead of weakening his political standing, these contradictions have strengthened his populist movement.

3.2.2 Populism’s Threat to Fundamental Rights and Freedoms of Women

As noted by Maria Tanyag (2018), whether through the “War on Drugs” or the declaration of Martial Law in Mindanao, Duterte’s leadership is characterised by hypermasculinity, macho attitudes, and the subordination of women. His mandate has weathered a deeply misogynistic political climate, marked by the decline of the UN’s Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda and massive women’s rights violations.

The WPS agenda is an international framework that addresses women’s rights, particularly in the context of conflict and post-conflict situations. Since 2010, the Philippines has been at the forefront of its implementation. Thanks to the WPS agenda, the Global

Network of Women Peacebuilders noted “an increase in women’s political participation in peace and security-related decision-making, including in peace negotiations, as well as improved protection mechanisms from human rights violations in conflict-affected regions” (Trojanowska, 2021, p.2). However, since the establishment of a populist-nationalist regime and militarised security policies in 2016, the rights of women have been increasingly targeted in Duterte’s political and media statements. For instance, Duterte was reported addressing state forces with a directive aimed at female communist rebels: “We won’t kill you. We will just shoot your vagina” (Tanyag, 2018). Additionally, Duterte has drawn criticism for his frequent “rape jokes” in which he publicly ensured that his soldiers would receive pardons for sexual offences committed under Martial Law (Reuters, 2017). HRW (2020) has also documented numerous cases of sexual and gender-based violence in evacuation centres in Mindanao.

The escalation of violence against women under populist-nationalist regimes is unsurprising, as populism—exemplified in this chapter by Duterte—often relies on the intensification of passionate and hypermasculine figures of leadership who emphasise aggression against the “enemy”. This type of violence manifests in the use of force through state-armed forces in response to crisis, as well as through the sexual domination of women. As underscored by Maria Tanyag, “paternalism within the family is extended into the public sphere”. As a result, the two female Philippine presidents, Corazon Aquino and Gloria Arroyo, had their leadership abetted not only by their ties to male political leaders but also by their portrayal of “feminine, maternal and Catholic identities” (Tanyag, 2018). This political strategy contributes to the reinforcement of biases against female leaders and the limitation of participation for non-elite women.

3.3 WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION IN POLITICS: AN UNEQUAL PROGRESS

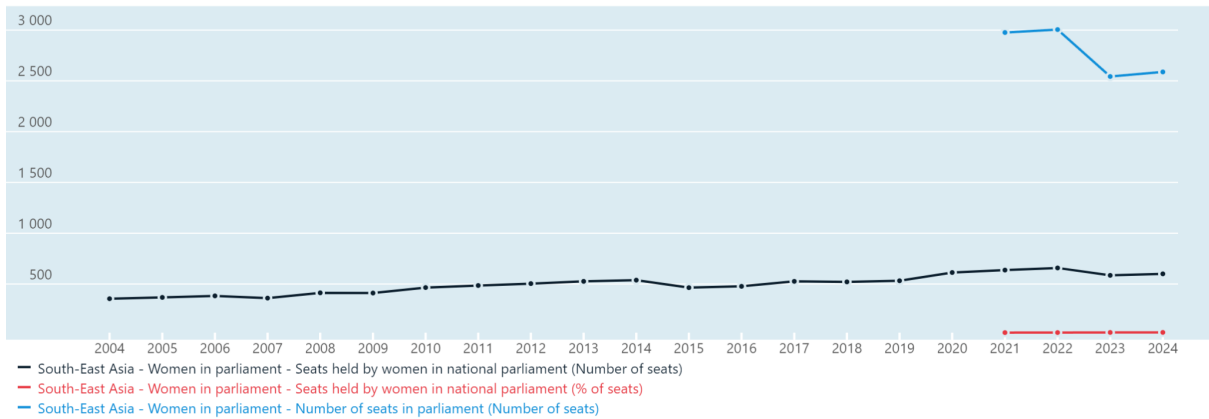
As mentioned above, men overwhelmingly dominate political leadership in SA. Coupled with the social expectations attributed to women, this dynamic can result in the election of governments that undermine women’s rights and provide limited opportunities for the empowerment of female leaders in the political sphere.

3.3.1 The Underrepresentation of Women in Politics

Although the number of women in political leadership positions has increased in both local governments and national parliaments over the past decades, progress remains relatively slight, and true gender equality is still far from being achieved. For instance, while 355 seats in national parliaments were held by women in 2004, this figure stood at 600 in 2024 (Figure

1). This aggregate, however, only represents 23.2 percent of all seats, falling below the global average of 27 percent as of 2023 (World Bank Open Data, 2023).

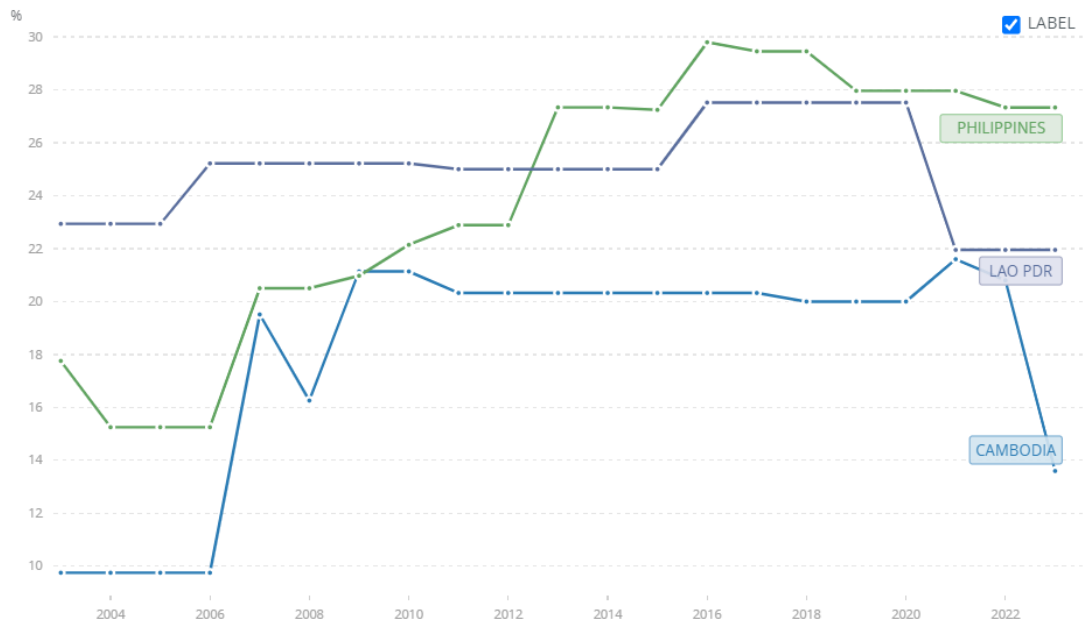
Figure 1: Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments in Southeast Asia, 2004-2024.



Source: SDG Indicator Data, 2024, available from: <https://data.unescap.org/> [Retrieved June 23, 2024]

Progress in women's political participation has also been uneven, with Cambodia and Laos experiencing the most significant decline in women's representation - over five percentage points - in the past 20 years (Figure 2), while the Philippines has shown no substantial change during this period. This indicates that attaining gender equity in political leadership in SE Asia is not yet a straightforward process, marked by both stagnation and regression.

Figure 2: Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%) - Cambodia, Philippines, Lao PDR.



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (ipu.org), in World Bank Data Base, 2023, available from: <https://data.worldbank.org/> [Retrieved June 23, 2024]

Furthermore, studies have shown that material wealth and political connections remain key factors for women pursuing political leadership. Women who are university-educated, financially stable, and without significant caregiving responsibilities face fewer barriers to leadership compared to those who grew up in relative poverty. As Richter (1990-91, p.528) observes, in Southeast Asia, “the most important political posts open to women have been so because of familial ties to prominent male politicians”. According to the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD, 2022), only 20 percent of women political leaders in Southeast Asia come from non-elite backgrounds. This underscores that patriarchal political culture primarily obstructs women from low socioeconomic status families.

3.3.2 Violence against Women in Politics (VAWP)

Across the ASEAN region, although women remain underrepresented in political life, the global increase in women’s participation has also given rise to attacks against women in politics (Krook, 2017). Violence against Women in Politics (VAWP), a subset of gender-based violence, encompasses any act or threat of physical, sexual, or psychological harm that inhibits women from fully exercising their political and human rights (UN Women, 2021). Such violence can occur in both public and private spheres and can be perpetrated by the state, as well as the public and family members. VAWP includes preventing women from running for office, voting freely, campaigning without hindrance, or enjoying freedom of speech and assembly. Based on in-depth interviews conducted by the WFD, 88 percent of the 45 women leaders interviewed reported experiencing violence and harassment due to their political roles.

The WFD report highlights that young, activist, social media-active, and Muslim female leaders are particularly vulnerable to such attacks. Female leaders in fragile democracies also face state violence. Their research found that women leaders in Malaysia and Thailand frequently endure surveillance, intimidation, and repression from state agents, including the police and military (WFD, 2022). For instance, Chonticha “Lookkate” Jangrew, a young political activist and leader of Thailand’s opposition Move Forward Party, has been regularly subjected to online abuse, intimidation, harassment, public humiliation, and persecution. She faces over 30 charges for her political activism, including protesting against the country’s conservative royal and military-linked government. The Centre for International Governance Innovation reported that Lookkate has been jailed, strip-searched, sexually violated in detention, and subjected to multiple physical and death threats, as well as “fake news” attacks. Additionally, she has been labelled a “drug addict, ghost, witch, prostitute, and traitor,” with attacks targeting both her appearance and political beliefs (CIGI, 2022).

This data illustrates the significant barriers to women's political participation in Southeast Asia, including economic inequalities, the absence of legal frameworks that support women's involvement, and insufficient protection against violence targeting women in politics, especially in countries with high levels of state repression.

3.4 CONCLUSION

Consequently, SA's hypermasculinist and female-underrepresented politics perpetuate a cycle where policies and decisions often fail to address gender-specific issues and concerns, further marginalising women in the political arena. The landscape of feminism and women's rights in SA has been shown to be complex and multifaceted, deeply influenced by historical, cultural, traditional, and socio-political factors. While the postcolonial context has shaped the premises of modern Southeast Asian feminism, traditional gender norms and family structures continue to play a significant role in society. These norms still dictate women's roles within families and societies, leading to their marginalisation in political and public spheres. Economic inequalities and a lack of supportive legal frameworks further impede women's political participation and expose them to violence and discrimination.

Populist regimes, which employ hypermasculine governance, have exacerbated these challenges, often manipulating cross-class rhetoric to sustain authoritarian control and suppress women's fundamental rights and freedoms under the guise of maintaining "law and order". Leaders like Duterte in the Philippines illustrate how populist strategies can appeal to various social classes while maintaining policies that do not align with genuine gender equality.

However, there are positive developments as well. Women's representation in politics, although uneven, is increasing. Female-oriented NGOs have emerged as powerful advocates for gender equality, utilising expanded educational opportunities and organisational skills to push for policy changes and greater inclusion. Countries such as Singapore demonstrate that strong legal protections can significantly enhance women's safety and access to opportunities.

In conclusion, to ensure that women can be active and equal participants in their own self-determination, Southeast Asian societies require a concerted effort to dismantle pre-existing discriminatory gender norms, implement robust legal protections, and foster inclusive political systems that genuinely reflect the diverse voices and informed political opinions of all female citizens.

4. MIDDLE EAST: POLITICS OF OPPRESSION, WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Women's political participation in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) stands at the forefront of the many challenges and paradoxes faced by women in the region.⁶ Despite gaining the formal right to fully participate in political life after their countries' independence - Lebanon in 1952, Egypt in 1956, and Morocco in 1963 - the reality stands in stark contrast with the day-to-day experience of these rights. Women's participation in formal politics faces significant challenges and women remain largely underrepresented in all aspects of public life. Much progress has been achieved, from fast developing rates of female employment, literacy, and life expectancy to positive advancements in women's participation in economic life, politics, and within decision making processes. However, women's economic and public participation remain the lowest in the world, far behind South America or Southeast Asia. Lack of gender equality is a particularly tedious challenge as it greatly hinders the region's economic development on the one hand, and ability to foster good governance on the other. Ten years after the Arab Spring revolutions, women and girl's rights remain precarious and principles allowing for systematic discrimination continue to be enshrined in the countries' legislative frameworks.

This chapter will look at these challenges in the MENA region, divided in three main subtopics: political participation in both formal and informal spaces of politics, genderwashing and the role of authoritarianism, and finally the obstacles to women's participation in public life, from negative stereotyping and legal impediments to the geopolitical context. It is crucial to bear in mind that a truly comprehensive analysis of gender representation in the MENA would require an extensive examination of each individual country's historical, social, and political specificities.

4.1 DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women's political participation in the MENA region presents a complex landscape, marked by both significant progress and persistent challenges. This section will delve into the intricacies of women's political participation in the MENA region, addressing both formal and informal spaces of politics.

⁶ This chapter has looked at similarities and different trends in the Middle East and North Africa including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.

4.1.1 Engagement in formal political institutions and impact on perceptions

Representation levels of women in politics are particularly low in the MENA with 10.4 percent of parliamentary seats being held by women in the region (Danon, 2021). However, variations amongst countries exist, ranging from four percent in Qatar and three percent in Kuwait to zero percent in Yemen and Oman (World Bank, 2023). On the other side of the spectrum, in the United Arab Emirates, the proportion of seats held by women has reached 50 percent in 2023 according to the World Bank data. Morocco stands at 24 percent, Egypt at 28 percent, Iraq at 29, and Bahrain and Saudi Arabia at 20. Overall, the region has witnessed a general increase in the number of women in government or in parliamentary assemblies (Berriane, 2022). This is the result of a number of intertwined historical, social, and political factors, including the introduction of affirmative action policies such as gender quotas in the early 2000s.

The analysis of the MENA region is particularly relevant as it illustrates the lack of systematic correlation between higher levels of female representation and the advancement of a feminist agenda or of women's rights in general. Indeed, if such theory were to be true, a significant gap in terms of women's rights should be apparent between Qatar and Oman. Although parity in the Emirati parliaments is to be praised, women are still too often appointed at high-profile positions dedicated to issues of women, children, or what can be called "soft" ministry (UNICEF, 2021). Sara Musallam is thus appointed Minister of State for early education, Sarah Al-Amiri as Minister for public education and advanced technology, and Shamma Al-Mazrui as Minister of Community Development.⁷ However, ministerial positions such as finance, interior, and foreign affairs, notwithstanding occasional outliers, are all largely male-dominated. Moreover, a significant regional, ethnic, and class divide appears to persist among women, with political representation predominantly comprising urban, educated, middle or upper-class women closely aligned with the established and dominant political elites (Berriane, 2022). The rural, lesser educated women belonging to ethnic or religious minorities remain largely underrepresented, if not persecuted altogether.

Gender quotas are widely debated because although they appear to mechanically lead to higher levels of women in politics, with countries without quotas such as Lebanon maintaining dramatically low levels of female representation, many scholars and politicians argue that they yield only marginal results in fostering genuine and sustainable social and political change (Darhour & Dahlerup, 2013). Indeed, quotas tend to instead reproduce power hierarchies ingrained in the various political systems. According to researcher Christina Bozena, gender quotas are the "least politically costly and most cosmetic way(s) to show a commitment to democratic development" (Bozena 2010, p.9). The glass ceiling is thus far from being broken, with self-censorship and feelings of being under qualified still greatly

⁷ See the full list of Ministers on the UAE Cabinet's official website <https://uaecabinet.ae/en/cabinet-members>.

undermining women and girl's ability to participate in political life (Cummings, 2023). Furthermore, acts of gender-based violence are a systematic deterrent with around 80 percent of women Members of Parliament s in the region being exposed to “acts or threat of physical, sexual and psychological violence” including through online media platforms (UNICEF, 2021).

4.1.2 Activism in Informal Political Spaces

Limiting our analysis of women's political participation to formal spaces of politics is, however, reductive. It obscures their involvement in informal and alternative spaces as illustrated by the contradiction between their omnipresence in key regional struggles and their systematic absence from official historiography (Berriane, 2022). The large number of women participating in the Arab spring revolts around the region triggered widespread media curiosity as it broke with general assumptions according to which “men play a role in public and women, too repressed, cannot” (Krause, 2012, p.2). In Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen women have played a proactive role in shifting the prevailing perception of Arab women as “passive and oppressed” to one of resilience and strength (Shalaby 2016, p.171).

Women play an influential role in grassroots activism, media channels, and NGOs through which they advocate for greater gender equality and the elimination of discriminatory laws. In post-2011 Tunisia, women activist groups championed the struggle for equal citizenship and gender parity in electoral law, which led to the ratification of the 2014 Constitution and the election of 68 women to the Tunisian assembly (Shalaby, 2016). Amidst widespread persecution and after years of women's rights campaigns, women in Saudi Arabia were allowed to vote and to drive, women in Oman were allowed to drive taxis, and Qatar went back on its previous obligation to secure a male guardian's accord before obtaining a driver's licence (James, 2023). The same cannot be said of various countries in which authoritarian regimes quickly filled the power-vacuum left by the ousting of dictators. In Egypt for instance, although a tremendous amount of women participated in the revolution, the fall of Mubarak in 2011 led to little change with women making up only two percent of the first post-revolutionary parliament (Sorbera, 2014).

NGOs and other organisations have allowed women to bypass to some extent their marginalisation in formal politics. The proliferation of small and local organisations has alleviated the elitist nature of female participation in politics. Indeed, it opened a framework conducive to the involvement of lower-working class, rural women within which they can become politically active. NGOs historically first developed within left and secular groups and were followed by the creation of Islamist women organisations with a different agenda and perspective on gender issues and women's rights. Women groups are thus not to be seen

as a homogenous entity, but rather as organisations with a wide array of sometimes conflicting objectives. Women are thus not absent as political actors, but rather occupy alternative spaces of politics. Recognising the role played by domestic and more private spheres, too often deemed apolitical, allows a more accurate understanding of women's real political participation.

4.2 WEAPONISING WOMEN'S RIGHTS: A POLITICAL STRATEGY

Many countries in the region have been heavily criticised for their gender-washing practices, that is, the promotion of gender equality and women's rights on a superficial level or for the sake of appearance, without implementing substantial or meaningful changes.

4.2.1 Gender Washing Practices in the MENA

Assessing the genuine advancement of women's rights in the region is not always an easy task as it requires going beyond spoken political discourses to analyse the reality of such policies. The necessity of building a strong international image to maintain solid trade and diplomatic relationships has led to the introduction of changes in women's rights, aimed at projecting progress and enhancing their image while systemic issues and inequalities remain unaddressed. Saudi Arabia stands as the prime example of gender-washing practices. Mohamed Bin-Salman's "Vision 2030" aims at accelerating women's social and economic roles, making female employment the core pillar of post-oil diversification strategies (Serafini, Bazoobandi et al., 2023). It includes gradually granting more freedoms to women, allowing them to vote, drive, travel abroad, and obtain a passport at the age of 21 without the approval of a male guardian. Mohamed Bin-Salman was even appointed as Chair of the UN forum for women's rights despite widespread international criticisms.

This stands in stark contrast with the regime's abysmal treatment of women, and minorities in general, with their systematic discrimination and persecution, with the imprisonment or death of hundreds of female activists, and the harsh discriminatory legal system failing to criminalise honour crimes, marital rape, and male guardianships (Sallon, 2023). This effective charm offensive's only purpose is to secure favourable opinions from Western countries and enhance bilateral relations (Serafini, Bazoobandi et al., 2023). This phenomenon is, however, not restricted to Saudi Arabia alone, but is rather a widespread future of gendered policies in the MENA region. In Tunisia, for instance, the national strategy for the promotion of women's rights, initially promoted by Bourguiba and later by Ben Ali, revealed to be nothing more than an attempt at improving the country's image in the wake of the systematic internal political repression of opposition parties.

4.2.2 The Role of Authoritarian Regimes in Limiting Women's Political Participation

Another factor greatly obstructing women's ability to impose themselves on the political stage is the nature of the regimes in place in the region, which employ various mechanisms that reinforce existing patriarchal structures and suppress broader democratic engagement. In Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, the Arab spring brought about a minute of respite, but the subsequent authoritarian crackdown has led to a heavy repression of any political opposition, including women's rights activists, thus limiting their ability to participate in politics (Shalaby, 2016b). Moreover, government authorities systematically target women political activists or politicians. They face threats of rape, kidnapping, and physical and sexual violence, which have become key constraints on women's political participation in both formal and informal places of politics. Further laws restricting freedom of expression, of assembly, and association hinder any form of advocacy for women's rights from men and women alike.

The extent of authoritarianism varies from country to country. Whereas in Egypt, any road to dialogue is completely blocked, whether with women's rights organisations or any form of activism, in Tunisia, the regime's interaction with civil society organisations is less obstructed.

4.3 CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Beyond materialistic considerations and statistical facts on the representation of women in public life, many insidious obstacles remain. These obstacles range from societal perception of women's traditional roles and values impeding their access to an equal position with men in society, to legal structures deliberately restricting their rights and a wider geopolitical framework conducive to instability and violence.

4.3.1 The Impact of Traditional Gender Stereotypes

The region's embedded patriarchal gender paradigm has a strong impact on women's ability to participate in the political and public sphere. It establishes a strict guideline for what is deemed to be appropriate behaviour and gender roles with a strong emphasis on motherhood and caretaking. These stereotypes contribute to a widespread belief in the region that women are less capable or suited for leadership roles, especially when it comes to politics, thus relegating them to domestic spheres and nurturing positions. Indeed, according

to the Arab barometer data, the proportion of men and women alike who agree that men make better political leaders than women, although slowly declining, is still unsettlingly high. For instance, in Palestine, 70 percent of citizens aged 30 to 39 agree with the statement. In Iraq, agreement is 67 percent and in Egypt it is 66 percent. The lowest figures are in Lebanon and Tunisia, with “only” 40 percent and 41 percent agreeing, respectively (Clare Roche, 2023).

The dominant perception, too often rooted in reality, that politicians are corrupt serves as another rationale for women’s absence from the “dirty game of politics” as the emphasis put on a woman’s reputation forbids her from entering into any activity that may tarnish it (Zaatari 2023, p.11). The reality of these stereotypes is further proof that achieving gender equality and promoting women’s rights compels solutions that go beyond merely augmenting the number of women in positions of power and instead tackle the deeply rooted assumptions of traditional gender norms and stereotypes at the heart of unequal dynamics within society. Algeria stands as a relevant example of this phenomenon. After the 2012 elections and the introduction of gender quotas, the proportion of legislative seats held by women soared from eight to 32 percent. However, the absence of a complementary strategy aiming at tackling negative stereotyping and supporting women’s education, employment, purchasing power, and access to healthcare and other social services quickly backfired. Gender quota laws were rescinded and the belief that women were deeply unqualified as political actors was dramatically reinforced. After the 2021 elections, women’s representation fell back to eight seats, serving as a reminder that an increase in women political representatives must be held in conjunction with broader measures taking into account the multifactorial nature of gender inequality, in order to translate into effective gains for women’s rights and gender equality (Clare Roche, 2023).

4.3.2 Legal Barriers and Structural Challenges

A common factor hindering gender equality in many MENA countries is the persistence of a deeply discriminatory legal framework, contradictory laws, and policy loopholes perpetuating patriarchal power structures in which women and girls’ voices and opinions are systematically marginalised (Plan International, 2020). Many national judicial systems in the region have conflicting legislation. Indeed, although most national constitutions guarantee equality for all citizens before the law, the permanence of coexisting discriminatory Personal Status Codes (PSC), that is to say, legislation based on religious interpretations and customary traditions, undermines any provision of equal rights in other texts (Berriane, 2022).⁸ These laws mostly regulate social matters from marriage and inheritance to hierarchical power relations within the family and women’s freedom of movement or dress code. For instance, according to the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Syrian

⁸ The Personal Status Code is a legal framework based on various Muslim jurisprudences that is used in most Muslim-majority states.

Constitutions, the legal age for marriage is 18. However, this is effectively nullified by additional provisions allowing a judge to deem the marriage legal if it is considered as beneficial for the child, while in Lebanon there is no age minimum (Plan International, 2023).

In the same way, paradoxically, in some countries a woman is legally allowed to be elected in Parliament, however, she might not be able to travel for a diplomatic mission outside of her country's borders without her husband's permission (Berriane, 2022). Many PSCs require a woman's obedience to her husband. Any form of disobedience (i.e if she leaves the marital home, works, or travels without her husband's permission) can result in her losing her right to spousal maintenance. In Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, courts can use "disobedience" as grounds to restrict women's access to divorce and deny them financial rights or child custody. Additionally, male guardians can denounce women's absence from their marital home which can result in their arrest and forced return (James, 2023). The gap between law and customary practice is further evident as, in many countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, women face daily discrimination and obstacles if they decide to live on their own. This includes when renting an apartment, not getting married, travelling on their own, or accessing certain professional and educational programs, even when such restrictions are not official policy (James, 2023). Several of these, including Yemen, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, further allow the male guardian to obtain court orders to issue travel bans in case of refusal to comply with their decision. Furthermore, the failure to criminalise honour crimes, the lack of accountability for gender-based violence, rape, or domestic violence, and the persisting absence of reproductive freedom is a widespread issue that has yet to be addressed.

4.3.3 Regional Instability and the Rise of Islamism

Although an entire report could be dedicated to this matter, another factor dramatically impeding gender equality and demeaning women's rights has been the steady deterioration of regional political stability and the rise of Islamism. Conflicts and power vacuums have led to the erosion of legal protections and social services, leaving women more vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and discrimination. In war-torn areas, the breakdown of law and order resulted in increased incidences of gender-based violence while conservative forces pushed back against progress made in women's rights (Alsharekh & Pourzan, 2021).

In countries such as Palestine and Yemen, as the security situation eroded, so did women's ability to travel freely and to exist safely in a public space filled with soldiers and heavy weaponry. In some Syrian territories or Houthi controlled Yemen, for instance, women are required to travel or be accompanied at all time in public places with a *mahram*, a representative who is either her husband or a man she cannot marry. War masculinises the

public sphere thereby isolating and confining women to the home and their domestic role, far from any professional prospects, school, or university.

The suffering of Palestinian women amidst the ongoing conflict cannot be emphasised enough as it has marked a renewed and unprecedented episode of gender-based violence. Several UN Senior officials and rapporteurs have argued that there were reasonable grounds to believe that sexual violence has been used as a weapon by both Hamas fighters and Israeli soldiers in the conflict (UN, March 2024). Violence is part of everyday life, and it is women and children in particular who bear the brunt of the absence of law and order, the massive security deficit, and above all, the proliferation of armed militias.

4.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the obstacles and complexities surrounding women's involvement in politics and public life in the MENA region. The Arab Spring brought some much needed attention to women's issues in the MENA, yet true political empowerment remains elusive. Despite formal advancements in women's rights in Lebanon, Egypt, and Morocco following their independence, where they enshrined women's rights to participate in political life, decades later the practical reality often falls short. Women remain underrepresented in formal political institutions and face significant barriers in informal political spaces.

For a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics, it is essential to consider the unique historical, social, and political contexts of each MENA country. Only through such nuanced analysis can effective strategies be developed to overcome the entrenched obstacles and to pave the way for greater gender equality and women's empowerment in the region. It is also necessary to move away from the assumption that women of the Middle East are oppressed due to the inherent backwardness of Islam and instead analyse the systemic, historical, and social roots and causes of persisting inequalities. It is also of the utmost importance that we remember that women, far from being the helpless victims the Western media have often portrayed them to be, are a key component of women's struggle for their rights. They engage in grassroots activism, lead community initiatives, and influence policy changes. Their resilience and agency are key components of the broader movement for gender equality.

CONCLUSION

This report has attempted to give a broad overview of the persisting challenges regarding women's political participation and women's rights. Although many differences exist between all the geographical areas presented, many similarities seem to transcend geographical boundaries and inform a global perspective on gender equality. Enduring negative stereotypes hinder women's ability to reach true equality in all parts of the world and no continent has managed to tackle the underrepresentation of women in political spheres. Social, economic, and geopolitical crises have a disproportionate impact on women and girls regardless of their geographical location, and discriminatory laws and practices continue to be prevalent in too many countries. They perpetuate systemic inequalities and obstacles which demand concerted efforts at both national and international levels to enact and enforce laws that safeguard women's rights and promote their active participation in all spheres of society.

Women's rights are not a national issue but a challenge for international politics. No real equality can ever be achieved if women in parts of the world continue to be discriminated against because of their nationality, colour, ethnicity, or religion. Enhancing representation is a cornerstone of fighting deeply rooted stereotypes, thus bolstering public trust in female political leadership. It serves as an illustration that genuine gender equality in political representation requires more than a legal framework, but demands comprehensive support systems and inclusive policies that empower women to succeed once elected.

The rise of populist parties globally poses a severe threat to women's rights, undermining decades of progress towards gender equality. The widespread promotion of backwards and regressive agendas is once more not a simple matter of borders, but a worrying and widespread trend that has deeply concerning impacts on women's lives around the globe. The way such parties misuse feminist rhetoric in order to advance their own agenda is region-specific, as this report has attempted to demonstrate. The erosion of the rule of law and democratic principles deteriorates the very pillars upholding women's hard-won rights. It illustrates how women's rights and democracy are inextricably intertwined and how there is no preserving one without the other. Populism, regardless of its form and its regional or national specificities, is always gendered.

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