

Women Representation In The Algerian Political Institutions

Dr.Souad Guessar

University of Bechar- Tahri Mohamed, Algeria, E-mail: Guessar.souad@univ-bechar.dz

Received: 03/2024, Published: 04/2024

Abstract:

This research examines the historical perspective of women's involvement in Algerian politics from 1962 to 2020. The primary objective is to investigate the factors that have impacted women's political participation, the challenges they have faced, and the progress made towards achieving gender parity in politics. Based on a variety of primary and secondary sources, including official records, publications, and scholarly works, this study demonstrates that Algerian women have made significant progress in politics in recent decades. However, they still face numerous challenges, including cultural and societal barriers, deep-seated patriarchal beliefs, and a lack of support from political factions. Despite the obstacles, women in Algeria are increasingly recognizing their political rights and participating actively in decision-making processes.

Keywords: women, politics, Algeria, participation, representation, challenges.

1. Introduction

Algeria gained independence from French colonial rule in 1962. This marked the beginning of significant social, economic, and political changes within the country. Although women played a crucial role in the struggle for independence, their participation in politics post-independence was initially limited by cultural, social, and political obstacles. Although the socialist government made efforts to promote gender equality and women's involvement in public life during the early years of independence, progress was hindered by the civil war that erupted in 1992. This resulted in a decade of turmoil and political instability. In Algeria, women face challenges such as patriarchal norms, limited access to education and resources, and discrimination within political institutions that impede their

representation and advancement in political spheres.

The issue of female political participation in Algeria remains complex, with women significantly underrepresented in positions of political power due to various barriers. The aim of the study is to explore the historical context, current status, and future prospects of women's political involvement in Algeria. The study aims to provide recommendations to enhance women's representation and engagement in political decision-making processes in Algeria. It delves into the challenges and opportunities for women in politics, examines legal frameworks for gender equality, and analyses societal attitudes towards women's participation. This will ultimately contribute to a more inclusive and diverse governance system.

This research paper aims to answer two questions:

- What strategies did women use to participate in the nation's political sphere and adapt to changing circumstances, and
- What obstacles did they face in upholding their newfound roles?

2. Women Rights after the Independence:

During the Algerian Struggle for Independence, women fought alongside men and gained a newfound understanding of them. They also received some level of acknowledgment from their male counterparts. However, after the war, their progress towards emancipation slowed down as they became less involved in politics compared to the conflict period. Although Algeria's constitution guarantees gender equality, including the right to vote and participate in government roles, practical implementation has remained challenging.

Since gaining independence from France in 1962, women's rights have become a central focus for civil society organizations and women's groups in Algeria. These associations have played a crucial role in advocating for women's rights and promoting gender parity.

Outlined below are the significant advancements in Algerian women's rights since independence, along with the pivotal role played by women's organizations in propelling these rights forward.

2.1. Family Law and Equal Opportunity

The 1984 family law recognised the entitlements of women to divorce, care for their children, and own assets, thanks to lobbying by women's groups and non-governmental organisations.

The authorities have not allocated funds to tackle the circumstances of rural women, who face high levels of domestic violence and persistently have significant rates of illiteracy. However, the Algerian government primarily focuses on meeting the financial, judicial, and societal needs of victims of violence.

Women's groups are at the forefront of the fight against female abuse in Algeria. In 2015, the National Union of Algerian Women launched a campaign called 'No Tolerance for Violence against Women' to raise awareness about the issue and advocate for stronger regulations and measures to protect women.

Algerian women are subject to the Family Code, established in 1984 by the Popular National Assembly. This code represents a conservative and patriarchal interpretation of Islamic law, which unfortunately reinforces male control and perpetuates gender inequality. This may conflict with the principles outlined in Section 29 of the Algerian constitution, which emphasises equality before the law for all individuals, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, birth, viewpoint, or any other individual or social circumstance. However, there are disputes regarding the relationship between Section 29 and Section 2 of the constitution, which designates Islam as the state religion. Section 2 is sometimes used as a justification for discriminatory actions against women, leading to ongoing debates and tensions between different groups.¹

The family law system has been criticised for showing bias against women in areas such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody and guardianship. According to these laws, a spouse is obligated to comply with their partner. In divorce proceedings, a husband can end the marriage freely, while a wife must fulfill specific conditions to seek a divorce. Additionally, women may have limited authority over their children under family law and may inherit less than

¹ Freedom House, Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Algeria, 3 March 2010, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4b99012676.html> [accessed 26 May 2023]

men. Several organizations advocating for women's and human rights attorneys have proposed changes to the current family law. Some of these proposals are currently being discussed within government circles and progressive political groups.

The penal code treats men and women equally, except in cases involving adultery, kidnapping, or sexual assault of minors. Section 339 of the penal code penalises individuals involved in adultery with imprisonment ranging from one to two years, without any gender bias. However, unmarried men who engage in adultery with married women may avoid punishment if they are unaware of the woman's marital status. Conversely, if an unmarried woman engages in adultery with a married man, she could face imprisonment for one to two years, regardless of whether she was aware of the man's marital status. In cases of abduction or sexual assault of minors, the offender can avoid punishment entirely by marrying the victim, which is permitted by the penal code.²

2.2. Social and Cultural Rights

In Algeria, women have made progress in healthcare, especially in the areas of childbirth and contraception, resulting in a decline in early marriages and fertility rates. However, disparities in healthcare delivery persist, with access often linked to factors such as wealth, connections, or location. Single mothers face challenges due to cultural norms, which can lead to poverty and housing insecurity.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of women who choose to wear the veil. Although they are fairly represented in the media, they still face discrimination in terms of career advancement and pay, which limits their ability to influence societal views on gender.

Despite being granted equal social and cultural rights on paper, Algerian women face substantial obstacles when it comes to accessing and exercising these rights. The Algerian family code imposes male guardianship on women, which restricts their autonomy. Furthermore, the impact of religious extremist

² Cited in Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, Mission to Algeria (Geneva: UN Human Rights Council, February 13, 2008), p15

movements restricts women's roles, limiting them mainly to domestic responsibilities. Consequently, women frequently face difficulties in making decisions concerning their health, reproductive rights, and participation in community initiatives, hindering their complete enjoyment of social and cultural rights in Algeria. (Naji, 2006, p23)

Efforts have been made by the state to provide family planning services, resulting in a significant decrease in the average number of children born per woman. However, abortion remains illegal and punishable by law, except in cases of rape by terrorists or armed groups as permitted by a 1998 fatwa. Although Algeria has constitutional guarantees of healthcare rights for all citizens, there have been reductions in healthcare expenditure. This has led to disparities in access to services based on region and social group. Women's ability to access healthcare is further impacted by religious extremist ideologies, particularly in rural areas, due to constraints on autonomy and decision-making.

Women in Algeria are actively involved in their communities, participating in various activities such as school and mosque-related associations, as well as the media. Although they make up a significant portion of media professionals, including journalists, it is unclear how much influence they have on media content. Women's rights associations that focus on social and cultural advancements face several challenges, including limited freedom of expression, inadequate funding, and fragmentation within advocacy groups with similar goals. These challenges hinder large-scale awareness campaigns. (Naji, 2006, p23)

2.3. Education and employment

Efforts have been made by women's groups in Algeria to improve women's access to education and job opportunities. The Association for the Advancement of Women's Employment provides vocational training and job placement assistance for women.

Marketplaces have also been established to support homemakers in selling their goods and increasing their employment opportunities. Marketing services have also been provided to enhance families' standard of living.

Algeria has demonstrated significant dedication to education, guided by the principle of providing equal opportunities to all individuals, regardless of their location or gender. At the primary level, almost all boys (99%) and most girls (96%) are currently enrolled in school.

Women's associations have played a crucial role in advancing women's rights and promoting gender equality in Algeria since gaining independence. Although there is still progress to be made in fully upholding and safeguarding women's rights in the nation, these organizations persist as a powerful catalyst for transformation.

2.4. Political Representation

Algerian laws recognise the equal political rights of women, who actively engage in civil society and participate in politics. However, there is a lack of female representation in high-ranking political and government roles.

Women in Algeria are well-represented in the judiciary, particularly at senior levels, with around 34% of judges being women. In the Council of State, 15 out of 38 judges are women, and the president of the Council of State is also a woman.

Algerian women were granted the right to vote in 1962, and these rights are protected by Article 50 of the constitution and Order 97-07 from March 1997, which ensures women's voting and candidacy rights. The criteria for voting and running for office are the same for both men and women. Women have been appointed and elected to positions at local and legislative levels. In 2004, a woman ran for the presidency but was unsuccessful.³

In 1999, the government legalized political parties, leading to the emergence of new parties, some with religious affiliations. According to Article 57 of the constitution, political parties cannot be based on religion, language, ethnicity, gender, trade, or region. Algeria has approximately 40 political parties, but only two have female presidents: The Party of Workers and the Party of the Youth Movement. In order to address the issue of female underrepresentation in politics, female members of political parties have proposed a manifesto to the

³ Algeria's Constitution of 2020.

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Algeria_2020.pdf?lang=en

government. The manifesto suggests implementing a quota system that would reserve 35% of seats for women in both local and national elections.

Historically, women have been minimally represented in the Algerian parliament, particularly after independence until the transition to democracy in 1989. Although there was a slight increase in female representation following the establishment of the CNT in 1992, women's representation remained low until the 2012 legislative elections, when they gained over 30% of seats for the first time. However, this progress was short-lived as women lost around 7% of seats in the subsequent 2017 elections.

The following figure illustrates the progression of women's representation in parliament from the time of independence until the resignation of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 2019.

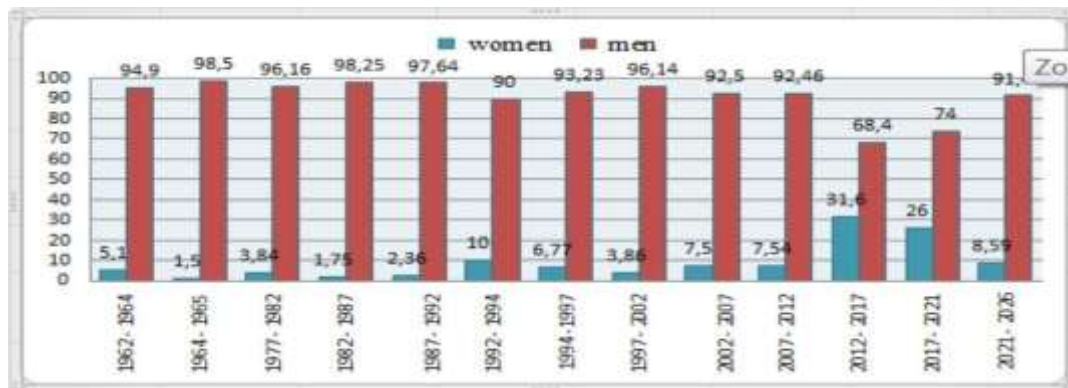


Figure: Ratio of Women and Men in the Algerian Parliament

SOURCE: Medkour, Nouredine. *Political representation of Algerian Women in the Parliament (1962-2021)*, in HUMAN RIGHTS AND PUBLIC LIBERTIES REVIEW. Vol°: 06 - N°: 03. University of Mostaganem:2021 p. 839

2.5. Algerian Women in Political Parties and Local Assemblies

Despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality, Algerian women have faced challenges in achieving proper representation in political parties and local assemblies. Statistics show that their representation remains low, with only 31% of local council members and less than 8% of parliamentarians being women in Algeria. This situation is attributed to social and cultural barriers, discrimination, and limited access to education and resources that hinder women's political involvement. (Rabeya, 2010)

Algerian women hold few leadership positions within political parties, often relegated to supporting roles rather than taking on significant leadership roles. This lack of female leadership presents a significant obstacle to women's advancement in politics, limiting networking opportunities, mentoring, and party support. Although there has been a slight improvement in women's representation in recent years, challenges in achieving gender equality in politics persist due to structural hurdles.

Algerian women are actively advocating for women's rights, gender equality, and social justice through legislative initiatives, law amendments, and policy advocacy within political institutions. Beyond formal political channels, Algerian women participate in activism through street protests, sit-ins, and social media campaigns to raise awareness of women's rights issues. Although progress has been made, increasing the representation of women in Algerian politics requires ongoing efforts to address societal, cultural, and systemic barriers. Effective policies must be implemented to promote women's participation and leadership in political spheres.

2.6. Women's Representation in the Algerian Legislation

The Algerian government has made significant efforts to encourage women's active involvement in driving the country forward. Special focus has been placed on their engagement in politics to help shape the development of Algeria through effective governance, recognizing the valuable contributions women make. This commitment is evident in the country's various constitutions, which align with international conventions and agreements endorsed by Algeria.

The Algerian legislature aims to promote gender equality by ensuring equal rights and responsibilities for both men and women. Women are encouraged to participate in electoral processes and take up key leadership roles, with the goal of empowering them and fostering a more inclusive political environment that represents the diversity and potential of Algerian society. (Medkour, 2021)

Throughout history, Algeria has demonstrated its commitment to upholding women's rights by ratifying international human rights agreements. The Algerian legislature has consistently emphasized the importance of gender equality in successive constitutions, in line with various international treaties ratified by the

state post-independence. This evolution is reflected in Algerian legislation, demonstrating harmony between these international agreements and the country's laws.

The Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria was established in 1962, guaranteeing fundamental rights and freedoms to its citizens, with an emphasis on gender equality. Subsequent laws and amendments have further solidified this equality, ensuring that all citizens are treated fairly and without discrimination, regardless of gender. Measures, such as introducing quotas for women's political representation, aim to enhance their presence in elected councils. This aligns with Algeria's commitment to promote gender equality in politics. (Cooke, 2010)

Despite these efforts, challenges persist, as evidenced by the fluctuating representation of women in legislative elections. Ongoing discussions and actions are necessary to continuously improve women's political participation and address any disparities in representation.

3. Barriers to Women Involvement in Algerian Politics

Throughout history, women in Algeria have been underrepresented in political spheres and face significant obstacles when attempting to engage politically. The following are some of the primary challenges that hinder women's engagement in Algerian politics:

3.1. Cultural Beliefs

A significant obstacle to the engagement of females in politics in Algeria is entrenched cultural beliefs. Expectations dictate that women focus on their duties within the household and family, rather than aspiring to political roles. Consequently, women aspiring to a political career may face inadequate support and restricted prospects.

3.2. Education Accessibility Challenges

In Algeria, women encounter restricted entry to education, especially in remote regions. The absence of educational opportunities could result in women lacking the competencies and information needed to participate in political affairs. Consequently, this could result in diminished self-assurance and proficiency in manoeuvring through the political structure, alongside a deficit in reaching the crucial networks and assets essential for achievements in politics.

3.3. Economic Challenges for Women in Algeria

In Algeria, women encounter notable economic obstacles when it comes to engaging in politics. The lack of financial means makes it challenging for them to run for positions of power or to manoeuvre through the political environment. Additionally, women often lack the access to vital resources and connections crucial for political achievements, like membership in political parties and affiliations with influential individuals.

3.4. Male-Dominated Political Organizations

Political groups in Algeria frequently exhibit a male-centric structure, posing challenges for women seeking leadership roles and representation. Women who succeed in becoming part of these organizations often encounter bias and insufficient backing from their male counterparts. These obstacles impede their progress in political spheres and their ability to influence policy-making processes.

3.5. Legal Restrictions

In Algeria, the legal structure may impose constraints on women's involvement in politics. For instance, women might encounter limitations on their movement or need authorization from a male guardian to partake in political endeavours. Such legal obstacles have the potential to restrict women from engaging in political campaigns and exercising influence in political decision-making processes.⁴

Numerous obstacles hinder the involvement of women in politics in Algeria, such as societal beliefs, limited educational opportunities, financial challenges, male-dominated political entities, and legal constraints. Overcoming these hurdles requires advocating for women's education, challenging cultural norms and prejudices, offering economic empowerment, boosting women's presence in political organizations, and enacting measures to combat gender-based violence in political settings. By taking these steps, Algeria can progress towards realizing

⁴ Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, Mission to Algeria (Geneva: UN Human Rights Council, February 13, 2008)

gender parity and fostering a political framework that is more accommodating and diverse.

4. Conclusion

The role of women in Algerian politics has evolved over time. Algerian women played a significant role in the War of Independence and were subsequently recognized by the Algerian government, which gradually improved their rights. They have made notable progress in education, social integration, and professional opportunities. Furthermore, there has been progress in women's involvement in political affairs due to advancements in Algerian laws pertaining to women's political empowerment.

However, women's political and civil liberties are still limited, which is only a part of the broader constraints affecting Algerian society. For example, the Algerian government still regulates freedom of expression and the establishment of associations.

The statistics provided present a diverse picture of the political landscape for Algerian women. Although women in Algeria have gained some political entitlements and engaged in legislative activities, significant challenges remain. Many women face obstacles in pursuing political office and securing representation in parliament. Furthermore, societal and cultural norms hinder women's involvement in politics.

Efforts to improve the political representation of women in Algeria remain crucial. This requires policy changes and cultural transformations to address the underlying obstacles that hinder women's participation in politics. The voices and perspectives of women are essential for a strong and vibrant democracy, highlighting the importance of Algeria's efforts to establish a more equitable and inclusive political arena for women.

5. References

1. Algeria's Constitution of 2020
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Algeria_2020.pdf?lang=en
2. Al Shater, Mounzir. Female Participation in Politics in Algeria. Master Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of the Degree Master of Business Administration in Public Governance. Modul Vienna university. 2013

3. -Balghis, Badri. *Women's Activism in Africa: Struggles for Rights and Representation*. Montgomery: Zed books, 2017
4. -Bouwer, Karen. *Gender and Decolonization in the Congo: The Legacy of Patrice Lumumba*. New York: Macmillan, 2010
5. -Cooke, Miriam. *Women and the War Story*, London: Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997 Freedom House, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa 2010 - Algeria*, 3 March 2010,
6. -Khatun, Rabeya. *Analysis of the Causes of the Independent Movement of Algeria in IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 19, Issue 6, Ver. V (Jun. 2014)*
7. -Medkour, Noureddine. *Political representation of Algerian Women in the Parliament (1962-2021)*, in *HUMAN RIGHTS AND PUBLIC LIBERTIES REVIEW*. Vol°: 06 - N°: 03. University of Mostaganem: 2021
8. -Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences, Mission to Algeria (Geneva: UN Human Rights Council, February 13, 2008)
9. -available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4b99012676.html> [accessed 17 May 2023] Jamal Eddine Naji, "La Journaliste Algérienne," in *Profession : Journalism Maghrébin au Feminine* (Rabat: UNESCO, December 2006)