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# Reclaiming Public Spaces:

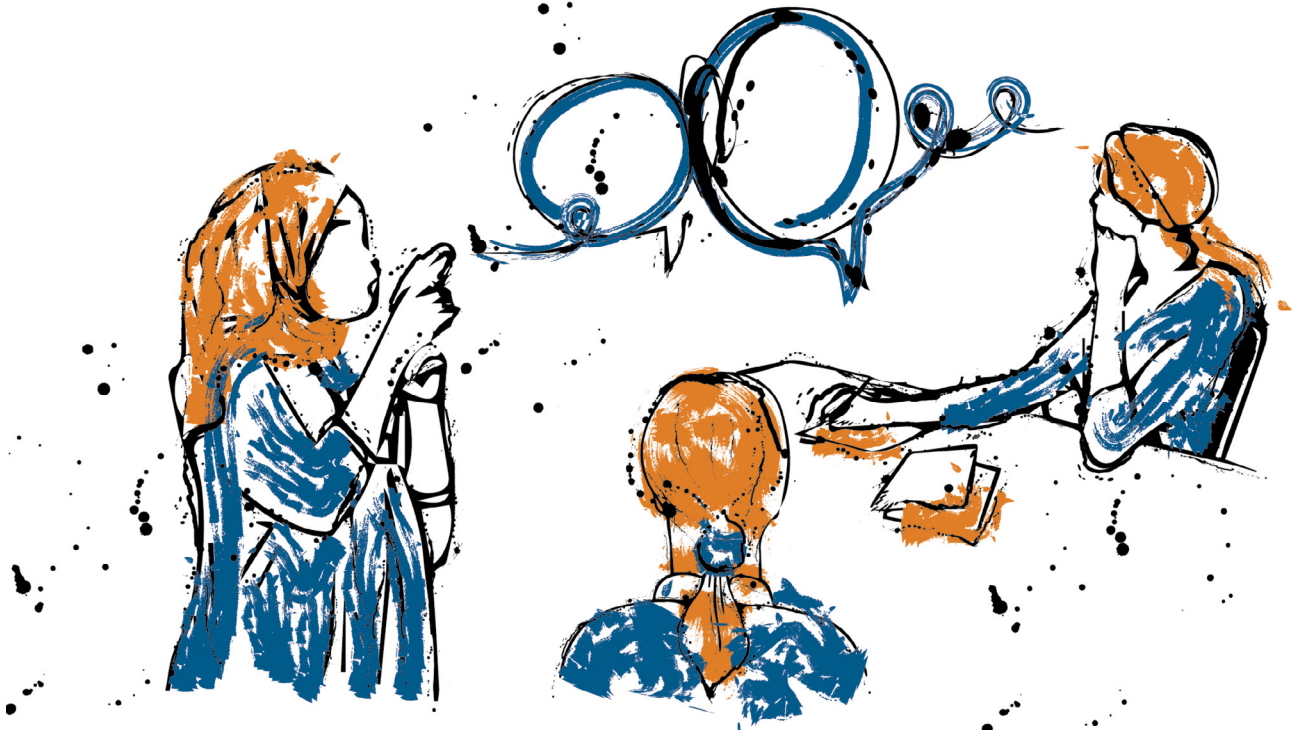
Syrian Feminist Narratives and Approaches  
to Political Participation

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## Reclaiming Public Spaces

### Syrian Feminist Narratives and Approaches to Political Participation



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Reclaiming Public Spaces:  
Syrian Feminist Narratives and Approaches to Political Participation  
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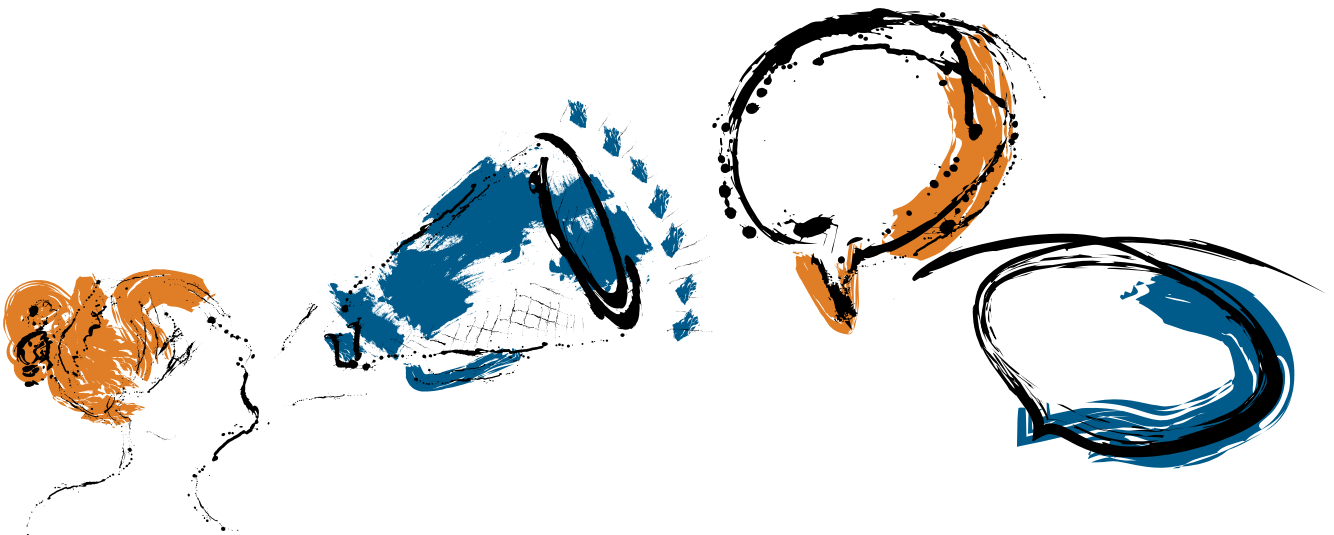
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# Introduction

For decades, politics has been defined by the dimensions related to the public sphere and state affairs, and by a comprehensive separation between the public and private spheres, despite the intersections between the two. This has resulted in a separation between the concept of politics itself, from individual and collective initiatives at the local and grassroots levels. Since the theories and histories of politics have been written and consolidated by male historians - like those pertaining to other social and human sciences - what was studied and published, and thus produced epistemologically, has revolved around politically active male figures and has relied on concepts created by men about the meaning of politics and its limited vision of the nation-state, political parties and movements, and international relations. Therefore, redefining “politics” as a concept is a feminist initiative that seeks to liberate this field from the dominant patriarchal modes of thinking, and expand the framework and scope of the concept of political participation, whether on the global, local, or grassroots levels.

Feminists generally agree on the importance of deconstructing the concept and science of politics, as well as producing narratives and new forms of knowledge in the field thus highlighting and promoting the role of women in it. However, feminists disagree on how to carry out these processes – both of deconstruction and of highlighting women’s roles. Thus, the forms of knowledge produced by feminist approaches are numerous and varied. The differences are generally related to feminist theories and its relation to the balance of global powers and the ideologies that govern them; they are also related to confronting these powers, and the attempts to liberate feminist theory from differing ideological relations and ideas, especially the racist ideology of colonialism. That is why the mission of postcolonial feminists, black feminists, and feminists from the “global south” (while also emphasizing the diversity of feminist contributions within different approaches) is a complex one which includes, in addition to the aforementioned attempts, liberating the field from the racist and colonial dimensions that had previously dominated it, and which still crop up in the epistemological corpus produced in the West on the topics of women’s representation in general, and political participation in particular useful to touch upon some of these differences, in order to understand them and attempt to come up with a feminist framework and approach to political participation that is based on a gender analysis – and more specifically, an understanding of women’s participation in the MENA region and what this participation means, especially in light of armed conflicts and wars.



Feminist agendas calling for the liberation of the political sphere from the Western narratives focus on the challenge of separating the private from the public spheres, and confronting the totalizing representations and theories of women and their issues, by emphasizing the plurality of women's perspectives and views, the real lives they lead, and how these shape their views and relations to prevailing systems and values. These feminist agendas also focus on acknowledging the differences between women according to their positionalities within these systems, institutions, and power relations, and their intersections. It is therefore important to develop a feminist framework and approach to the concept of politics itself, thereby determining the frameworks for women's political participation, by recentering the narratives and experiences of these women themselves.

**This can be achieved by posing the following questions:**

1. How do women see this concept and what are the points of agreement or disagreement on it?
2. What can form the basis for understanding politics and women's participation in it?
3. What are the existing systems that limit and impede the presence of women in the political sphere?
4. What are the forms that women's political participation takes?
5. Can we uncover the underlying areas of politics at the grassroots level which constitute the main focus in the political process, and find the root causes for concealing and thus marginalizing women's contributions in these political processes?

With this vision, we will be drawing on the voices of Syrian women who participated in the focus groups facilitated by partner organizations<sup>1</sup> within the 'Gender-sensitive Transitional Justice' project that took place in early 2021, in which the number of participants in the sessions in Turkey, Lebanon and Syria was over 50 women.

The incorporation of the voices, opinions, and experiences of Syrian activists in this paper will be proposed as a model or an example, to present a vision of what it means to present a feminist theoretical approach and framework based on the views and experiences of the women concerned, all while maintaining an understanding of the specificity of the context and the historical, political, and ideological processes that contribute to creating this context. This paper will present a brief analysis of women's understanding of, as well as ideas and perspectives on, the concept of politics and the notion of political participation; in addition, it will present their evaluation of political participation programs and the ideas they propose as solutions to political participation and empowerment processes. This paper will resort to women's opinions and experiences by including feminist analyses of the issues at hand, thereby providing a perspective that includes a realistic dimension as expressed by the participants, in addition to the intellectual and theoretical dimensions, whether in relation to analysing situations, or with regards to the proposed methods of intervening for women's political participation.

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<sup>1</sup> The partner organizations are Release Me, Start Point, Zenobia Association for Syrian Women, Women Survivors, and Dammah Organization

# Politics and Women's Political Participation from a Feminist Perspective

The title of Carol Hanisch's 1969 paper, "The Personal is Political", quickly became one of the most important principles in feminist theory, but Hanisch herself (2006) considers its use in theoretical analysis only in relation to the connection between the public and private spheres to be an underestimation. Her criticism posits that the title of the paper was not her own, and was not exclusive to the paper itself, but was rather the name of a certain stage in the struggle for women's rights, which came from a feminist movement that was fighting for freedom within the context of the struggle against racism and the Vietnam war. The phrase's usage in critical theory has, in many cases, stripped it of its meaning by not placing it in its proper historical and political contexts or situating it within the feminist movement. Therefore, the phrase the personal is political came to denote, in Western feminist theory, a link between state institutions and the family institution, rather than the link between different hegemonic systems and the impact of these relations on the personal lives of individuals.<sup>2</sup>

Hanisch states in this regard that any theory must have two contexts: the first being political, economic and social; and the second being dynamic, meaning that its development has resulted from a continuous movements and struggles against the forces of patriarchal oppression, racism, etc. which makes struggle and political movement the key to any true theory. If we apply this to the concept of women's political participation, we will quickly find that this concept, and the meanings and tools it incorporates, is insufficient in expressing the state of affairs or people's experiences in general – especially since the concept of women's political participation has always been linked to a number of tools that are a reflection of a particular historical stage, in which the limits of political intervention by any peoples were set by geographical boundaries, which themselves were defined in order to materialize ideas of nationalism and patriotism, and the roles defined therein that enforce state management through democratic elections, etc. Among the most widely used definitions of the concept of political participation is: "An activity with the effect or purpose to influence the functioning of the government."<sup>3</sup>

Defining political participation in the context of the nation-state contrasts with the global, political, and economic contexts in which the state is not the main player in politics, but the acts of which are formed by the state's international relations – this is especially true when we discuss the global south.

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2. Hanisch, C., 1969, "The Personal is Political" *Women's Liberation*, with a new introduction, 2006. To see Hanish's two articles in 1969 and 2006: <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>

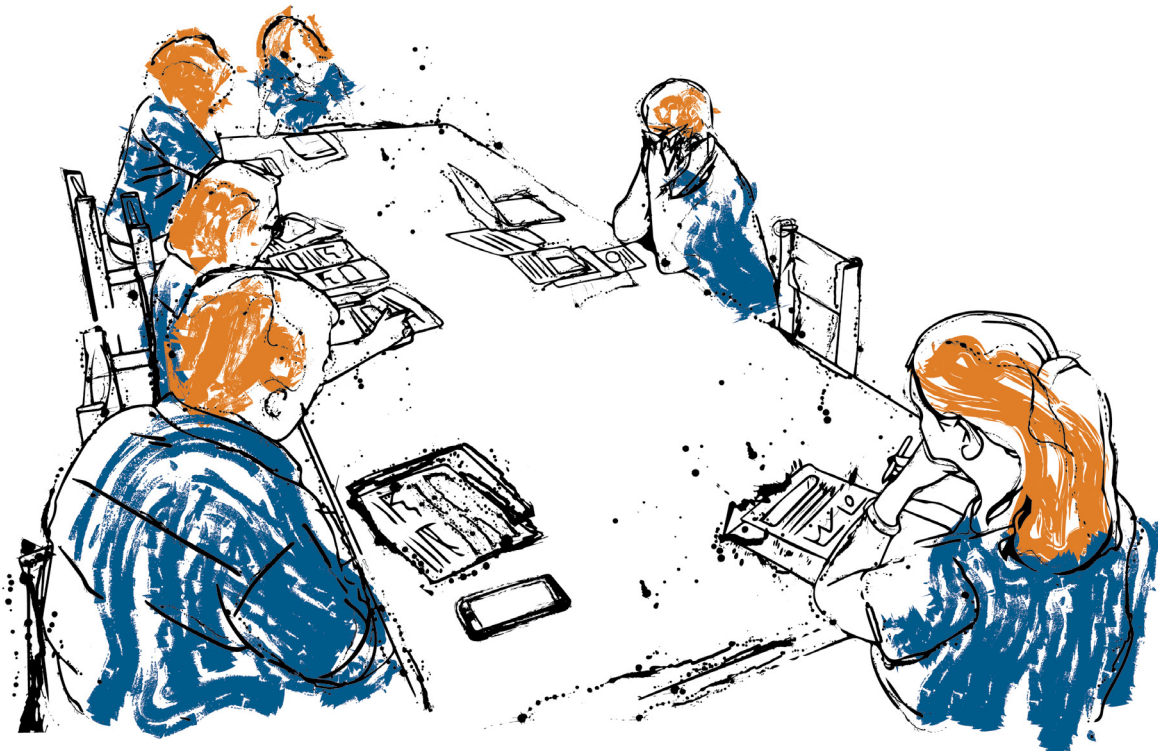
3. Brady, Henry E., Verba, S. and Schlozman, KL, 1995. "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation" *American Political Science Review*.1995, vol. 89, issue 2, 271-29, p.38

This is why liberal feminists in particular have focused on posing questions about gender and the state, public policy, representation, political parties, participation in elections, and public political institutions. This argument promoted an individualistic approach to politics and state activities and was concerned with showing that women were excluded from public life, that the state and the majority of political practices were patriarchal, and thus aimed to enhance women's presence in political spaces.

This approach to political participation was reflected in the feminist agenda and the programs concerned with gender, although gender, as defined by Rowen Colin (2009), constitutes

“The structure of social relations determined by reproductive roles, and the set of practices that define social differences between sexes and produce distinctive social practices between them.”<sup>4</sup>

By this definition, we see gender as a “structure of social relations” which transcends the roles and relations between different groups and defines the comprehensive framework for the production of concepts of masculinity and femininity attached to each in any particular society. This structure of relations includes the political, cultural, and economic dimensions that influence the production of policies that would reproduce these distinct concepts and practices between women and men. This structure of relations also includes the various balances of power and authority. Therefore, when we discuss gender, we must note that the societal values attached to all genders and the roles assigned to each, are produced in the form of unbalanced relations that are protected by political, cultural, and economic authorities, and which themselves institutionalize this form of relations within various social institutions and within the system of laws that govern and regulate this form of relations.



4. Raewyn Connell, 2009. *Gender: Short Introduction*, Polity, p. 11  
 Scott, J. 1986. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis". *The American Historical Review*, 91 (5), 1053-1075.  
 doi:10.2307/1864376

If understanding gender is “a basic tool for denoting power relations”<sup>5</sup>, then a gender analysis which not only assesses the differences between women and men and the social structure of these differences in terms of norms and roles, but also “the relations of individuals within structures and how these structures arrange the processes of daily life.”<sup>6</sup> In order to reflect this definition on the political participation of women, it is necessary to look not only at the policies that seek to grant women decision-making positions, but also at how the daily lives of women, within the structure of the various power relations, can reflect on the politics that govern and establish discrimination. Understanding or analysing any issue must be related to how deep this form of authority and organizing of relations between women and men has taken root in general, and within any society in particular. To understand the context, it is not only important to study the experiences of women but also their understanding and the ways in which they express this understanding. For example, in the focus groups and discussions organized for the purposes of producing this paper, women’s understanding of politics focused firstly on a general conception, through which politics is defined traditionally as the relationship of individuals to the state and parties; then, it was connected to the changes that occur in the daily realities of these women. In order to clarify the points of intersection between these two conceptions and their effect in shaping women’s political awareness and the attitudes they take, which may seem contradictory if one is not paying attention or not listening to women properly, we must look at some of the definitions used by women, definitions which clarify not only women’s understanding of politics, but also the reasons for women’s withdrawal from politics.

“ Politics is, according to the majority of women participants, defined as *the regulator of the relation between individuals and the state.* ”

While describing this relation, women participants linked politics to a number of referents: corruption, repression, dictatorship, taboos, the exclusive domain of a particular group, and the task of the elderly and the elite. In the first part of the definition of politics, women participants relied on commonalities, but in the second part, they described a practice based on life experiences. So for many of them, politics is defined as a passive thing and not an active process they want to take part in. If this conception of politics is the prevailing one among women, then women’s political participation in the Syrian context will necessarily be a reflection of what they see and the attitudes they take towards lived politics, not politics in the abstract. This relation becomes clearer when women define the nature of their relation to politics, often summarized in terms that indicate their wish to withdraw and not engage with the current political frameworks and systems, for reasons linked to mistrust. These views challenge the existing notion that women are marginalized in politics in general, and indicate that the lack of political participation may itself be a position regarding the existing form of politics. Therefore, the political participation of women is closely related to their experiences within the existing form of politics, and not to women’s ideas of themselves, or their relation to any masculine dimension, or even the popular notion that politics is a man’s role. Relations to politics are linked to the political and economic dimensions that govern the relationships of individuals to the state and the regulatory roles of the state, parties, and institutions in general.

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5. Scott, J. 1986. “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”. *The American Historical Review*, 91 (5), 1053-1075. doi:10.2307/1864376

6. Ibid.

It was also clear from women participants that the relation with politics and relation with the state is not only based on gender, but also other important factors that must be taken into consideration. Women participants expressed that there is a group that benefits from politics, using expressions such as “the beneficiary elite” and “the politics of those close to the regime” and others, which specify that the politics from which women distance themselves is not only patriarchal, but also restricted to a particular group. Women participants did not mention the factors of class, sect, and religion in their criticism of politics, but rather referred in several ways to “stakeholders,” and identified these interests with power sometimes and other times with economics.

These associations are very important in studying those determinants that play a role in the absence of women’s political participation, in a context that essentially defines politics by its belonging to specific individuals and which does not represent the general or majority of the people or take their interests into consideration. Accordingly, if we want to analyse this situation in a manner that explicates what the women participants mentioned and expressed, then it must be considered that non-participation in such a context is an actual position and not a passive act, and that on the contrary, participation in a context in which the individual has no effect, but is effectively a subordinate is itself the passive political act. Thus, women’s political participation should not be measured in any standard manner, but rather in a manner that expresses the understanding that determines women’s attitudes and behaviours towards any issue, including the issue of political participation.

Returning to the phrase the personal is political and how it should be defined by the dynamic context and the reality in which women live, political participation needs to be redefined and viewed through the existing political framework and system. If this framework is determined in the context of a ruling system that functions for the benefit of a particular group at the expense of the majority, does not express the interests of the public, and takes the totalitarian approach as a framework for governance, then boycotting or non-participation is a form of disinvestment in this system. The personal position that women take in this case is political and merits consideration if we were to understand women’s political participation and how to develop programs for political participation based on what women see and express in terms of ideas and positions.





# Levels of Women's Political Participation

The positions and analyses in the previous section pose a set of questions:

- Do women only take a position in politics as a form of resistance to existing frameworks and systems, or do they have another conception of political participation entirely?
- Do women provide different practical examples of what political participation means through their practice?
- Do these models provide a proposal for how to analyse women's political positions and participation?

The answers to these questions will take into account the different attitudes of women, rather than a general one. At a time in which women's participation in the discussion panels showed a kind of withdrawal and divestment of politics, it is also necessary to mention the different forms of political participation that women referred to and how they evaluate them.

Participation at the decision-making level – Numbers and effectiveness: Within the discussion groups, there were those who believed that the presence of women in political positions is important for change on two main dimensions, the first is achieving political change from within and integrating women's points of view; the second is increasing the number of women in political positions in order to change the prevailing stereotypical view of women. This level of political participation is usually worked on and viewed as a "higher" level of women's representation and political participation. But there was also a kind of criticism levelled at the focus by civil society organizations and donors on this level and not any other, so that work on it became part of the overall goal of increasing the number of women in political positions, not any change at the level of frameworks and systems or at the level of prevailing traditional ideas about women.

Another criticism of this sort was expressed by some of the participants in sentences such as: "It is not important for women to reach decision making position, it is important which women will,"

- meaning the issue is that numbers should not represent another achievement of women – rather, what can be changed through the presence of women in these areas?
- And is there a possibility for qualified women to reach higher positions in the realm of politics, or will women's access be similar to the arrival of a new category of men who are far from qualified, thereby benefiting those who do not necessarily represent the interests of the public and women?
- What if the access of women was another representation of men's interests?
- These questions raise other issues such as, can there be work to give women access to decision-making positions before there is a systematic feminist work program for change?
- Can this change happen only through women's rights to political participation and without linking these rights to the totalitarian system that legitimizes discrimination?

Disagreement among women activists regarding the mechanisms, methods and levels of women's political participation is equally intense on the theoretical level. In fact, differences between feminists can be established by their position regarding two issues: the formal understanding of equality and the principle of non-discrimination, which encapsulates "gender-neutral strategies". The problem with this approach and the strategies related to it is that it approaches the inclusion of women in political participation from a patriarchal perspective – the process of representation becomes linked to creating and providing equal opportunities for women, who are expected to access these opportunities and perform in accordance with the same rules and standards as men. Thus, this approach and the strategies related to it does not take into account the discrimination and systemic inequality that resulted from a long history of exclusion and marginalization of women's issues. It also does not attempt to change the political dimension, or the cultural and economic forces that contribute to discrimination – thereby putting the onus on women who have to perform according to patriarchal standards. The criticism levelled at this approach is, therefore, based on the premise that women cannot access opportunities or benefit from them in the same manner as men when there are systems and institutions that establish discrimination and guarantee its survival. And if women were able to reach decision-making positions through this approach, it would be at their own expense, because access is not necessarily linked to change at the levels of family, society, existing values, systems, and frameworks. Participating women supported their criticisms of this approach with examples of other women who tried to reach decision-making positions and had to try to balance their domestic, as well as political roles, which increased pressures on them. Some mentioned experiences also showed that this form of intervention sometimes puts women at risk of being subjected to harassment, assault, marginalization, or exclusion.

Women participants were vocal about their views that programs for political participation and gender rights

“ Do not resemble us. ”

“ Do not reflect our reality. ”

“ I do not find myself in the examples. ”

in addition to other expressions that indicate dissatisfaction with said strategies, which do not bind their personal lives with the programs and plans through which women's increased political participation is targeted. These views necessitate looking at other forms and approaches to work that are based on women, their perspectives, and the contexts in which they live. For example, the approach to social justice and objective equality precludes a refusal to generalize the experiences of women and focuses instead only on paying attention to the contexts that define women's experiences and reflect their perspectives<sup>7</sup>.

This Western feminist approach has challenged the idea of the "universality of women's experience," the idea that women share experiences with one another because they are uniquely women, or that an intervention that works in one context can be applied to another.

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7. See among others: Abu-Lughod, L. 2006. Writing Against Culture. In *Feminist Anthropology: A reader*, edited by Ellen Lewin, Blackwell Publishing; Rosaldo, M. 1980. The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding. *Signs*, 5(3), 389-417; Ardner, E. et al. 2018 *The Voice of Prophecy: And Other Essays* (CHAPMAN M., Ed.). New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books; Clifford, J. 2010. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. University of California Press.

Refusal to generalize women's experiences is not only related to these experiences, but defines them through a gender perspective and analysis, which itself relates and intersects with other types of discrimination and oppression, be it based on class, religion, sect, colour, race, ethnicity, etc. Access, according to this approach, is not interchangeable with gender equality – social justice is, of which equality is one component. This means that strategizing must be based on an analysis of the “structural convergence of intersecting force systems”<sup>8</sup>. This cross-sectional framework will help analyse the socio-structural arrangement of power and the location of women in it.

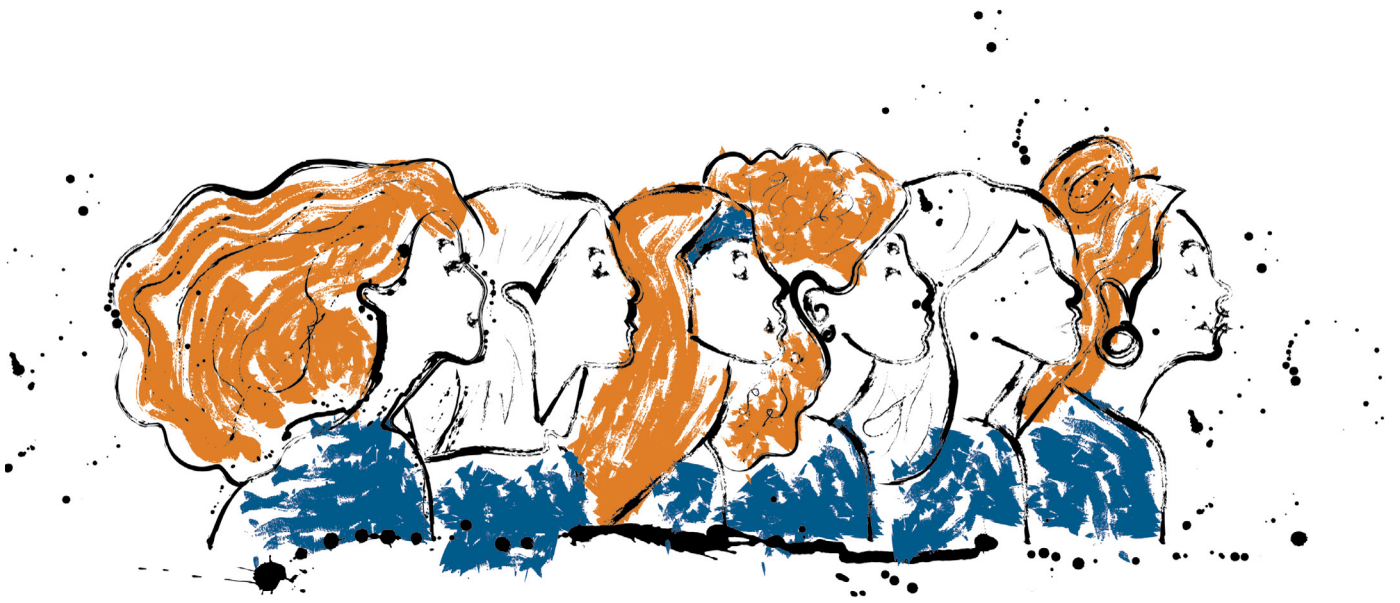
This intersectional framework also helps monitor women's attitudes and points of view based on their position in existing power structures, thus providing a plurality of viewpoints, attitudes, and practices, which help develop strategies that respond to the plurality of experiences by viewing them within their economic, political, and cultural contexts.

### Political participation and grassroots change:

The second level that forms an important basis for women's understanding of politics and their political participation is the level of “change”. Women participants emphasized that politics is not only a change in policies, but rather a change in the variety of dimensions, and the nature of these dimensions of everyday life. Women participants addressed the issue of change at the level of individuals, values, civil movements, systems, institutions, frameworks, and the state itself. It bears noting that change at the level of individuals was an important dimension to consider for the participants in the discussion, especially change within the family framework, and in the roles of women and men and their education. That is why it was emphasized that “change begins with challenging patriarchal ideas and raising awareness within families.” If work is done on this front, we can anticipate change at the state level – and thus, change at the level of individuals can contribute to a change in ideas, which in turn impact behaviours, and that, in itself, is a form of political participation. A number of participants shared experiences that confirm their involvement in civil work did not come from a vacuum, but was rather a result of the changes that occurred at the family level, to the roles usually assigned to each member at home. Women participants indicated that the basic level of women's political participation resides in the changes that women make within the family. Hence, the strategies required at the level of political participation are those that address women in the variety of positions and interests relevant to them; and the impact that integrated support for women will have is greater than the impact that will result from supporting and empowering women politically.

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8. Collins, Patricia, 2019. Intersectionality as critical social theory, Duke University Press, p.37.



Another issue which was mentioned by many participants and is related to the previous one in terms of change, is regarding the nature of change that women bring about by challenging societal authorities. When women get involved with support programs, regardless of the nature of said support, be it charitable, humanitarian, or concerned with human rights, they – women – do not only provide services or carry out campaigns, but rather confront certain groups and stakeholders, and consequently the work of women at the community or grassroots level is a political act insofar as it is focused on tipping the balance of power, whether directly or indirectly. The participants' ideas on power may not be clear or concise, but women's work at the grassroots level deals with issues that affect women, and therefore it is – in principle – based on joint work among women themselves, which is different from working in any official capacity on issues of political participation and decision-making. For example, raising such issues as education for girls and its importance directly confronts the issue of early marriage; curbing early marriage, in turn, grants women the opportunity to develop themselves and their capacities, thereby increasing the possibility of decision-making at the family level, and providing a greater space for choice. These are tools that are seen by the participants as important in achieving change, and they must be considered as tools of political participation because of their direct impact necessary for any comprehensive change.

In summary, when speaking of women's political participation, women participants consider grassroots work to be of greater importance, since it allows the real participation of women in decision-making processes, and thus facilitates change at the level of root causes, not just numbers or quotas. Change at the grassroots level is also not a substitute for change at the level of participation in decision-making. However, there must be a comprehensive vision of what women's political participation means, one which does not ignore the different dimensions involved, and which aims squarely at changing structures of relations, power, and ideology. The importance of change, then, lies in changing the ideas expressed in the goals and tools used to establish comprehensive work programs, which in turn take working women, their voices, and daily lives as their starting point.

# Women's Political Participation in Wars and Conflicts: Analysis of Obstacles and Intervention Criteria

What has been discussed so far aimed at unpacking and defining women's political participation from the perspective of Syrian women who participated in the discussion panels. It is necessary to take into account the context in which women considered political participation, its impact, and its relation to the revolution, by situating them as refugees in Lebanese, Turkish and Jordanian refugee camps, and interrogating their vision and modes of participation in transitional justice programs and peace negotiations.

The issue of women's political participation in negotiation and peace building processes has emerged as a basis for measuring the participation of Syrian women since the start of negotiations between the Syrian regime and the opposition in 2013.<sup>9</sup> Since the beginning of the revolution, women's labor movements did not participate properly and the feminist movement, which was an integral part of the revolution in the beginning, and was not given the chance to contribute properly either. As the women participants pointed out, informal grassroots movements played a key role in starting the revolution and determining its peaceful course; the presence of informal women's networks and groups helped organize in a variety of ways, and although the pre-revolutionary civil movement in Syria worked within the framework of the regime, many grassroots movements were formed through regional action groups and committees that worked on many fronts, including charitable work and programs with limited goals and durations. And since the Syrian context differs from the other contexts in which the Arab Spring came to be, in terms of regime control and its consolidation of media and means of access to information, these movements, especially the feminist among them, were not fully appreciated, and many considered women's political participation in Syria to have begun in asylum and exile, which is sometimes framed as an opportunity to empower women politically.

These ideas have orientalist and patriarchal tones, since they did not take into account and limited the discussions of women's issues to a given stage, and the contributions of women throughout Syrian history and the role they played since the mandate, through numerous coups d'état and various political upheavals.

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9. See UN Women's Report on "Supporting Syrian Women's Engagement in the Syrian Political Process": available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/05/syrian-women-engagement-in-politics> (accessed 15 May 2021)

This form of analysis is necessarily related to the goal of involving women in peacemaking processes, negotiations, and training programs, which many women participants believed were not up to par or did not express what Syrian women require. Perhaps this was evident in the formation of the Women's Advisory Group for the Geneva Negotiations, instead of being present at the negotiations table. The participants believed that the form of representation for Syrian women in the negotiations was the result of the "militarization" of the revolution, and since the feminist movement in this articulation was anti-militarist, it was absent from representation. This absence deprived Syrians in general of a third party that rejects the options the Syrian people have been forced to choose from, "either the regime or the jihadist movements."

On the other hand, women participants stated that these programs focused solely on the effects of the war on women and children, in a manner that confined interventions to relief and humanitarian aid – not going beyond the traditional framing of women as "victims" or engaging them in any real way.

Regarding work on gender-based transitional justice programs, the participants discussed the withdrawal of said programs from issues of political justice. In this context, the participants indicated that gender-based transitional justice programs that take into account state and militia violence, discrimination, and the different dimensions of women's experience during displacement and in refugee camps and others, must also take into account the plurality of women's demands and experience. For example, the participants raised the issues of political detainees, stating that transitional justice for some women should include issues of arbitrary detention and forced disappearance, since a lot of women have been arrested and sometimes had husbands, brothers, or fathers among the numerous detainees; in these cases, justice for women demands justice for these detainees and their families, that gender-based justice is not, in other words, exclusive to the nature of violence against women, but rather inclusive of the political conditions that legitimize violence, including violence against men.



Among the feminist objections to the handling of issues of violence against women in times of war is that focusing on violence against women, specifically sexual violence and rape, can depoliticize these issues and shape it through a Western perspective that emphasizes the “universality” of women’s experiences. Maryam Tektin (2011), for example, sees that the solution should not be by not paying attention to violence, but by linking violence to different political dimensions and practices. Tektin, therefore, states that an important distinction must be made between the political and politics with the latter being the set of practices by which order is created and maintained; while the former is the process of disrupting the established order. Programs concerned with social justice within humanitarian relief still generally function on the level of politics, in that they do not challenge the established order, but rather reproduce it, because they do not link violence against women to the political root causes of wars, they do not look at issues of equality and social justice in a holistic manner, and therefore their discussion of the effects on women are specific and linked only to gender discrimination, the analysis of which is limited to differences in experience between women and men. Political justice, according to Tektin, should take the form of an action program that disrupts and disables the oppressive established order by addressing gender-based justice without tethering it to the distinctions that characterize men as either aggressors or owners of means of protection, and women as bodies that are in constant need for protection, since this model still relies on general feminist western modes of analysis. These programs must also include an analysis of the full range of women’s, as well as men’s positions, without resorting to gender-essential differences.

Another issue raised by women participants was the focus of unders and international organizations’ agendas pertaining to women’s refugee issues, on humanitarian empathy, which manifested in relief programs. While these programs are sorely needed, they do not necessarily meet women’s demands. This focus was linked to stressing on some rights at the expense of others, resulting in a separation between issues and the severance of their interconnectedness. At a time in which women in the camps played a variety of political and economic roles, aspired to improve the living conditions of asylum seekers and their families, and defied conventions, they themselves were not present in decision-making processes. Women participants also criticized the way women are dealt with and the manner in which agendas are set – resorting in communication with women to a “superior and incomprehensible language” that often result either in a feeling that the women concerned are unable to understand what is happening or in a withdrawal from work due to a feeling that these programs do not represent them. One of the most common examples that women mentioned was the issue of their formal presence in conferences and discussions regarding issues of women’s political participation; women participants felt that their presence was not essential and that in many cases they were dealt with either as subordinates to international organizations or as subordinates to the men participating in the conferences.

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10. Tektin, M. 2011. “The Gendered Human of Humanitarianism: Medicalising and Politicising Sexual Violence,” *Gender & History*, Vol.23, No.2 August, p. 250–265.

It was also pointed out that support for grassroots movements and activities with an informal character is still limited, because funding and support are linked to governmental approvals, and development and programming processes are basically agreed upon between funders and public institutions, and especially major donor organizations. Establishing development programs, including those related to empowerment and working with women in conflict and in refugee camps, may be more difficult, as the women in question are subject to two working systems, the humanitarian relief system and the country's own system, usually joined through negotiations in order to reach work settlements. These settlements and conditions are later imposed in the form of programs and action plans, so what is left for local organizations to work with are the results of the aforementioned settlements and not the demands of women themselves. Women have described funding policies, including the forms of women's absence or their formal representation, as politically corrupt, as the selection of organizations to implement certain programs or the selection of women to participate in conferences and workshops is sometimes linked to the perspectives adopted by these women and organizations and their proximity to funders, the state, or certain parties – they, in other words, do not form real representation and development, especially in the context of political development programmes.





Within this approach there was a kind of agreement based on the formal representation of women, whether in negotiations or in political development processes. Women participants did not believe their opinions had a role in these programs, even if they were to be found materially in them. The participants also referred to the bullying that is exercised, which results in a state of fear and reluctance among women to share their opinions, for example. Examples were given of how women's clothing choices (wearing or not wearing a veil) or the colours of their choice were sometimes criticized, as if to instil a sense of inferiority in women and remind them of the importance of their appearance instead of their thoughts. Accordingly, the participants identified a number of problems in working tools on the subject of political participation and developed a number of solutions to these problems, the most important of which were the following:

### **Participatory approach v/s dialogue:**

Although there are Syrian women rights and human rights organizations, as well as various work committees run by women, feminist organizations have not been able to impose their agendas on funders and INGOs. Most of the programs are arranged in advance, and local organizations sometimes have a role in participating in developing plans and programs, but the goals and ideas themselves are prearranged. Most international and donor organizations rely on forms of work that may appear to take into account local perspectives through involvement in programming, but they do not include these perspectives in decision-making processes. Some participants differentiated between programming and decision-making processes, denoting that participation in decision-making basically means the existence of a joint dialogue that is not hierarchical or based on power relations between women, local and intermediary organizations, and donors. In other words, it is not enough for women and organizations to ask about the required needs; instead, there must be dialogue and joint action at all stages. The criticisms levelled by the women participants against the development processes in relief programs and women's political participation programs are in line with feminist criticism of what is called "participatory development," which focuses on top-to-bottom strategies. Elaine Kapoor (2005) argues that participatory development programs, with the goals, objectives, and values they set, are essentially based on unbalanced power relations between the North and the South, and that these relations derive their tools from the Western perspective on women's representation and their issues.<sup>11</sup> Kapoor provides examples of how to implement participatory projects; however, facilitators of the consultation processes and the discussions usually have the upper hand in defining the goals and objectives, who gets to participate and who will be excluded; thus, the results of the consultations are in a sense predetermined even if they are undertaken to the fullest.

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11. Kapoor, Ilan, 2005. "Participatory Development, Complicity and Desire" *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 8 (2005), p. 1203-1220.

Kapoor also criticizes the bureaucratic processes to which international organizations subjugate local processes, shaping them through institutionalization and professionalization into models with similar structures, not only in terms of developmental goals, but also in form and in relation to women – and instead of a relationship built on support and solidarity, we have a relationship built on professional communication only. Within this framework, the participatory development process becomes not only an empty slogan, but also a “product” that is adopted by local organizations (a household name or brand). This shifting reflects the relationship between the West and INGOs, a relationship that is completely divorced from the spirit of the grassroots work. Development programs become more like brand packaging processes.<sup>12</sup>



### Dialogue and solidarity:

In contrast to participatory development, the participants suggested providing safe spaces, creating dialogue, and strengthening feminist solidarity so that women could propose and discuss the issues they consider appropriate and which affect their immediate lives. Solidarity and dialogue mean that we do not expect women to run contrary to the reality of the situation, nor exclude those who have ideas that harmonize and support the existing structure of relations. It is necessary, first, to understand how women define their relationship with values and ideas within the political, economic and cultural contexts in which they exist, thereby creating opportunities for women to have a safe dialogue, in which opinions are respected and exchanged in a way that makes it possible for women to produce their own forms of knowledge, not those imposed on them as axes of discussion.

The required dialogue, as discussed by Spivak (1992), is not a neutral one, but rather one that produces a kind of negotiation and aims to ensure not only the participation of women,<sup>13</sup> but also the practice of listening that goes beyond documenting what is said or done, as in the case of participatory development, but ensures, instead, the formation of a shared understanding which respects and allows for different narratives, even if they compete or contradict one another. This establishes meaningful engagement with women and forms a real contribution to changing and challenging power structures, in a manner that does not impose views and ideas on women or exclude some of them.

12. Ibid., p. 1211.

13. Spivak, G C. 1990. *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies and Dialogue*, edited by Sarah Harasym, Routledge.

### Non-separation of the private from the public, empowerment as a tool and a goal:

One of the suggestions that women participants emphasized to achieve integrated political participation was merging capacities and not separating different empowerment programs from each other. For example, the participants brought up examples confirming the necessity of accompanying empowerment in the field of politics with economic and educational empowerment, programs for combating and protecting against violence, awareness programs, and awareness raising programs. These goals cannot be achieved without progress on multiple levels. One of the most important criticisms of empowerment programs was related to the lack of attention paid to women's conditions within the family framework in political empowerment programs. This brings us back to the definition of politics as the domain of decision-making positions. The importance of empowering women is not considered in terms of creating programs that take into account the special needs of women, such as the need for women activists to ensure the safety and security of their children during their attendance of meetings and conferences, negotiate with family members, and organize work at certain times that do not conflict with familial roles. Paying attention to family roles is important, according to the women participants, because change does not happen suddenly – before women are able to challenge stereotypical ideas, they must first negotiate with their families and communities and achieve mutual trust between them, their families, and the society within which they work. Empowerment, therefore, must be holistic and not only singly focused on abilities and skills related to any particular topic, separately from the wide variety of capacities and options.

This form of intervention, as practiced by some women and the organizations they work in, indicates that feminist grassroots movements recognize the comprehensiveness of intervention, that women activists benefit from a broader understanding and a wider framework than the traditional one concerning the political participation of women. This analysis is consistent with what Naila Kabir (2005) calls “strategic life choices”<sup>14</sup> for women, which must be put in consideration when planning any development program. In this regard, Kabir distinguishes between real choices (strategic choices) that guide the exercise of other choices (dependent choices). For example, Kabir suggests that not all choices are strategic and that strategic choices are associated with the challenge of power. For example, strategic life choices for women include marriage, having children, the right of guardianship over said children, the freedom of movement, participation in activities, and the formation of associations and organization. Being able to decide among these choices helps frame women's other choices and impact their daily lives.<sup>15</sup>

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14. Naila Kabir (2005) “Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A critical analysis of the third Millennium Goal,” *gender ant development*, Vol. 13, No. 1.

15. *Ibid.*

### The ‘capacities approach’:

Perhaps one of the most significant intellectual approaches to development, which takes into account the participants’ points of view on the topic of inclusive development and the intersection of rights, is the “capacities approach”, developed by Indian philosopher Amartya Sen. The capacities approach suggests that achieving an egalitarian society requires shifting focus away from services/skills and nearer to capacities. To reach capacities, the focus should be aimed at achievement, freedom, and “the need for evaluation which reflects the choices and freedom of individuals.” For Sen, the essence is an assessment of what people can actually do, and what he calls “the ability to work as a determinant of well-being.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, evaluating progress through the capacities of people in lived reality. For Sen, development is the “expansion of one’s capacities”. Thus, the set of abilities chosen to assess development and progress should represent a person’s freedom to achieve different functional clusters. Based on the capacities approach, work on political participation, as discussed by women participants, should not be carried out in isolation from the other capacities which form an integral part of achieving equality and social justice, and which must include:

1. Legal personality/personhood: Recognizing that women have full and equal personalities or personhood status to men, whether on the level of laws, programs, or practice on the ground.
2. Taking familial and family-making decisions.
3. Access to and control over resources (including real choices about work, types of work, equal inheritance, etc.).
4. Transportation & mobility.
5. Body safety and security: Freedom from violence in its various forms within the family, society, and the state.
6. Physical and mental health.
7. Education and the right to learn.
8. Political representation, expressing opinions in society, and influencing politics on various levels.

It is not enough to link work with a particular capacity to other different capacities; freedom of choice must remain central to the developmental process, Sen suggests, for two reasons: first, “the evaluative purpose: the assessment of progress should be done primarily in terms of whether people’s freedoms have been enhanced,” and second: “the effectiveness of developmental processes: the achievement of development depends entirely on the free will of individuals.”

### Evaluating development processes accordingly, we must take into consideration the following points:

1. whether the programs create opportunities;
2. introducing and raising awareness on the existence of opportunities;
3. free access to opportunities;
4. freedom of choice and participation;
5. the possibility of achieving capacity. Naela Kabir went even further with her capacity approach analysis, by identifying specific ways to analyse real options through the availability of what she calls “the creation of alternatives”. She suggests that any evaluation must take into account;
6. the availability of alternatives in terms of freedom of choice, and the ability to choose differently. Alternatives should not only exist, but must be seen and made known to women.<sup>17</sup>

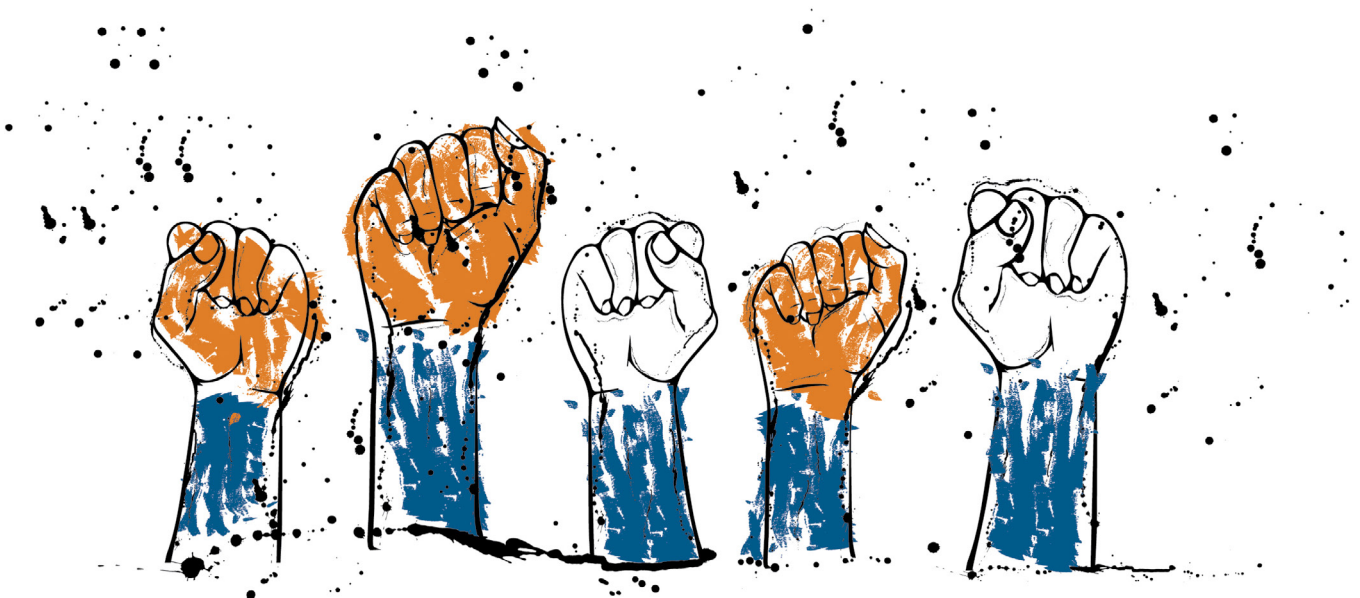
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16. Amartya S., 2003. “Development as Capability Expansion,” in Fukuda-Parr S, et al Readings in Human Development, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 54.

17. Naila Kabeer (2005) “Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: A critical analysis of the third Millennium Goal,” gender and development, Vol. 13, No. 1.

From the preceding discussion, and according to both the participants' point of view and the feminist theoretical analysis, we can undertake an analysis of women's political participation by developing the "capacities, options and alternatives," in addition to studying the roles women play in different capacities, all while taking into account the notion of choices and the relations governing them, as well as alternatives that women create to achieve them. Through this mode of analysis, we will introduce an alternative to the commonly accepted way in which women's political participation is regarded, as many examples of women leaders or hidden leadership practices will be uncovered in this analysis. Also, this approach will play a role in highlighting the intersection between capacities, which should not drop the intellectual dimension regarding the intersection of power relations with the enjoyment or non-enjoyment of certain abilities, and the conditions that prevent the realization of these capacities.

When talking about women's political participation, we should not limit said capacities to a specific shape or form, **as any change on the level of roles and relations is a change that affects power relations – and therefore, is a political one that should be considered within the scope and concept of political participation.** Change at the level of policy and decision-making positions is inevitably going to be preceded by a change at the grassroots level. The grassroots level means a change in terms of ideas and attitudes among individuals, the local community, and various institutions such as the educational, familial, cultural, or religious institutions, etc. It also means change in terms of services, capacities, and various programs that would provide opportunities for self-development, potential development, and negotiation skills. Change at the grassroots level does not exclude work at other levels, but there must be a comprehensive view that encapsulates expected results in light of the political and economic contexts. If women's participation in political processes will grant them a kind of legitimacy, then direct participation may be ineffective or counterproductive to women. For example, there are many women in parliaments and decision-making positions in Arab countries, but the presence of women did not change the stereotypical image of women, since representation is still symbolic through the quota system, only allowing a small number of women, and following only specific criteria for success. Either that or a backlash occurs against women's political participation. This is why grassroots and mass political participation in these cases may be more effective in the long run, and would also work for radical change, and challenge the existing political structures.





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