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Power, participation, and patriarchy: a mixed-methods study of Palestinian women in political and public life with insights on health

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Abstract

Background This study examines the extent and nature of Palestinian women's political participation and leadership, highlighting the challenges they encounter in accessing and exercising power within political and public arenas. Despite formal policy advances, ongoing occupation, entrenched patriarchy, and political fragmentation continue to create significant barriers to meaningful political inclusion. Grounded in feminist institutionalism, the research analyzes how formal institutional frameworks and informal socio-cultural norms interact to shape women's political engagement, while assessing the impact of gender equality policies within this complex socio-political landscape.

Methods This study employs a qualitatively-driven mixed-methods design to examine women's political participation in Palestine. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of twenty Palestinian women—including politicians, activists, and policy experts—representing diverse backgrounds. Thematic analysis, using Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, identified key themes related to barriers, enablers, and the perceived impact of gender-related policies. To contextualize these findings, quantitative data from official sources—such as the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and the Central Elections Commission—were used to map national trends in women's political representation.

Results Findings reveal that while gender equality policies such as the creation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs and legislative quotas have yielded formal achievements, these measures remain largely superficial and symbolic. Political power continues to be concentrated within patriarchal and elite networks, limiting genuine representation and influence of women, especially grassroots activists. Legal ambiguities and political repression further undermine women's political engagement. Nevertheless, Palestinian women demonstrate resilience through creative resistance and continued activism in civil society and public spaces.

Conclusions The study highlights the gap between formal gender equality policies and substantive political empowerment of women in Palestine, emphasizing the need for structural reforms that address institutional, cultural, and political barriers. Strengthening women's political involvement is crucial not only for advancing gender justice

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but also for fostering inclusive governance in a fragmented and conflict-affected society. Future efforts should focus on amplifying grassroots voices, enhancing legal protections, and challenging patriarchal norms embedded within political institutions.

Keywords Barriers to Political Participation, Feminist Institutionalism, Gender Equality Policies, Palestinian Women's, Patriarchy, Power, Socio-cultural Challenges

Background

Globally, women's participation in political and decision-making roles has improved, yet progress remains uneven and fragile [1, 2]. Many countries have removed formal gender barriers, yielding symbolic and practical benefits [3], but substantive gender equality in political power remains elusive [4]. In contexts such as Afghanistan, patriarchal norms have re-emerged, reversing earlier gains [5]. Similarly, the U.S., Hungary, Poland, and Russia have experienced gender backlashes under populist and nationalist agendas [6]. Persistent challenges—including exclusion from networks, role stereotyping, poor media representation, and lack of institutional support—continue to shape women's political experiences [7–9].

Barriers are also highly context-specific. In Palestine, women's political exclusion results from the intersection of Israeli military occupation, entrenched patriarchy, and fragmented governance. These overlapping systems constrain women's civic and political engagement, an area still underexamined academically. The Palestinian context is marked by settler-colonial occupation, territorial fragmentation, movement restrictions, and pervasive surveillance, alongside political divisions between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, which weaken governance [10, 11]. Uprisings such as the First (1987–1993) and Second Intifadas (2000–2005) shaped grassroots mobilization and women's engagement in activism [12, 13].

Gender dynamics intersect with national struggles. Palestinian women have long served as educators, caregivers, civil society leaders, and activists, balancing occupation pressures with internal patriarchal constraints [10, 14]. Socio-demographic shifts—women outnumbering men in universities, rising literacy and employment, and declining fertility rates—reflect new aspirations and economic realities [15, 16], influenced by family structures, digital connectivity, and labor dynamics.

Despite these changes, women's formal political representation remains limited. Legal frameworks, quotas, and ministerial appointments often appear gender-inclusive, but real power remains in male-dominated networks. Informal institutions—social norms, tribal systems, religious authorities, and kinship-based patronage—frequently override legal guarantees [11, 13, 17, 18]. This study uses a feminist institutionalist framework to analyze how formal and informal institutions interact to shape women's political agency and exclusion.

Some progress has occurred. Legal reforms, CEDAW, and UNSCR 1325 offer tools for promoting gender equality [19]. Electoral quotas have increased female representation in municipal councils and the Palestinian Legislative Council [14]. Women-led civil society organizations advocate for legal rights, provide leadership training, and mobilize communities [20]. However, reforms are often symbolic or poorly enforced.

In Palestine, protracted occupation, political instability, and social fragmentation make the link between political participation and women's health particularly significant. Engagement through government roles, unions, community leadership, or activism impacts psychological, emotional, and social well-being. Historically, women played active roles in resistance and mobilization, particularly during the First Intifada, yet were sidelined in formal political structures post-Oslo Accords [11]. This marginalization limited influence over national priorities, including health policy, and contributed to exclusion, loss of purpose, and emotional fatigue [21]. Conversely, civic engagement can foster empowerment and resilience, enabling women to assert agency under patriarchal and colonial systems [11, 21]. Women active in public life report stronger mental health, deeper community ties, and better navigation of structural violence and displacement [22, 23]. Increased representation also promotes inclusive healthcare, protection against gender-based violence, and access to mental health services [11]. Thus, political participation is inseparable from the broader struggle for dignity, justice, and holistic health [21].

Structural barriers remain. Tribal affiliation, militarized politics, factional divisions, and patriarchal norms restrict participation and confine women to "soft" policy roles, while securitized politics limit gender-sensitive reform [11, 17, 18].

Nonetheless, Palestinian women resist exclusion through local elections, NGOs, youth movements, and digital campaigns, expanding political space, especially among younger generations [21–23].

This study examines three interrelated dimensions of Palestinian women's political participation: (1) their current levels of representation in public and political institutions; (2) the structural, cultural, and institutional barriers they face; and (3) the role of gender equality policies, civil society, and resistance movements in fostering more inclusive environments. In doing so, the research highlights critical knowledge gaps in how settler-colonial

occupation and institutional fragmentation shape gendered power relations.

Finally, this study incorporates a less commonly addressed but crucial dimension: the emotional, psychological, and health-related impacts of political exclusion. It examines how women's experiences of marginalization and activism affect their well-being and resilience, providing a more holistic account of political life under occupation. This inclusion responds to growing calls to integrate affective and health dimensions into feminist political analysis.

By analyzing both institutional barriers and grassroots strategies, this research contributes to broader debates on gender justice, democratization, and social resilience in conflict-affected societies. It argues that expanding women's political participation is not only a matter of rights, but a pathway to inclusive governance and transformative social change in Palestine.

Theoretical framework

This study adopts Feminist Institutionalism (FI) as its guiding theoretical framework to analyze Palestinian women's political and public participation. Rooted in both feminist theory and new institutionalism, FI provides a nuanced lens through which to examine how gendered power dynamics operate within formal and informal political institutions [24, 25]. It emphasizes that institutions are not gender-neutral; rather, they are embedded with norms, rules, and practices that systematically shape and often constrain women's access to political authority and public leadership [26].

In the Palestinian context, where traditional patriarchal structures coexist with political instability and military occupation, and where governance is divided between the West Bank and Gaza, feminist institutionalism is especially pertinent. This framework enables a thorough investigation of the ways in which institutional arrangements—such as party hierarchies, electoral systems, and quota laws—interact with cultural norms and geopolitical limitations to influence women's political representation [27]. Additionally, it emphasizes how, despite official legal reforms that support gender equality, informal institutions like religious discourses, social norms, and family expectations perpetuate male dominance [28].

Women's political participation, particularly in contexts marked by systemic patriarchy and conflict, is often accompanied by significant emotional and psychological challenges. Feminist scholarship highlights that such participation entails not only formal political labor but also emotional labor—the often-invisible work of managing emotions, both one's own and those of others, in highly gendered political spaces [15, 29]. Additionally, theories of embodied politics emphasize how political exclusion and violence are experienced and inscribed on

women's bodies, shaping their mental and physical well-being [16, 30]. These frameworks illuminate the ways in which women's mental health in political life is deeply intertwined with broader structures of power, gendered expectations, and social marginalization.

This study uses FI to examine how Palestinian women engage, resist, and reshape political spaces in addition to the institutional and structural barriers they face. It examines how institutional gender dynamics both influence and are influenced by civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and international frameworks like the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and the (CEDAW) [31]. This method encourages a critical analysis of the visible and invisible systems that govern women's participation in public life and politics.

To clarify the analytical approach, Figure 1 presents a visual framework informed by feminist theory and applied to the Palestinian context. This diagram illustrates the multilayered structure of factors influencing women's political participation, beginning with broader macro-level conditions and moving through institutional dynamics—both formal and informal—to highlight the emotional, embodied, and structural dimensions of women's engagement. It also shows how civil society actors and international frameworks interact with these institutional layers, potentially reshaping gendered power relations. The visual framework thus provides a logical structure for understanding the study's findings.

Study setting

This study is situated within the complex and deeply politicized context of the occupied Palestinian territories, specifically the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These regions are shaped by the intersecting forces of Israeli military occupation, internal political fragmentation, and entrenched patriarchal norms. The longstanding settler-colonial regime enforces territorial fragmentation, movement restrictions, and surveillance, which together erode democratic life and deeply constrain civic and political engagement for all Palestinians—especially women [10, 11]. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [15], the estimated population of Palestine reached approximately 5,483,450 in mid-2023, comprising 2,785,900 males and 2,697,550 females, indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution.

Internally, the division between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza has produced parallel and often unstable governance structures. These fragmented institutions limit the implementation of consistent legal reforms and weaken institutional accountability. Within this environment, women's political participation is shaped by both formal mechanisms—such as gender quotas and legal frameworks—and informal barriers, including tribal affiliations, conservative

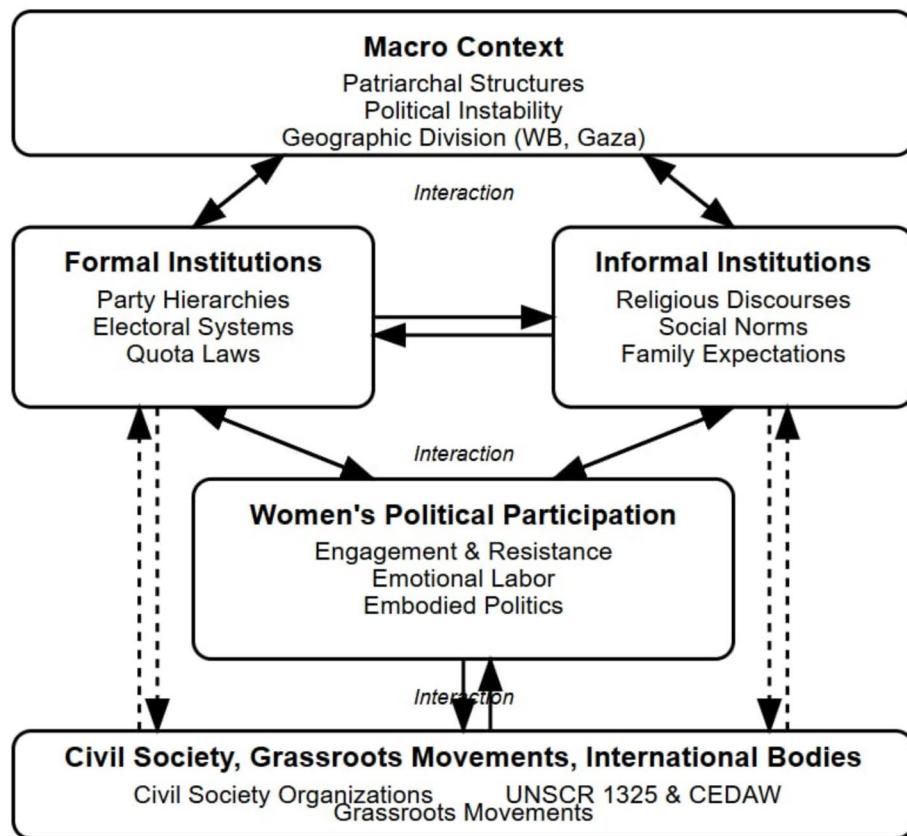


Fig. 1 Feminist Institutionalism Framework for Analyzing Palestinian Women's Political Participation

religious interpretations, and kinship-based patronage systems [11, 14, 17, 18].

Over the past three decades, key political developments such as the First and Second Intifadas, failed peace negotiations, and stalled elections have significantly influenced gendered political dynamics. While women have historically played leading roles in resistance movements and civil society activism [10, 12, 13], their representation in formal political decision-making remains limited and often symbolic. Nationalist discourses and security concerns continue to dominate the political agenda, sidelining gender justice and feminist priorities [13, 18].

Despite these challenges, Palestinian women are not passive recipients of marginalization. They have increasingly carved out alternative forms of political engagement—from founding NGOs and leading digital campaigns to participating in local elections and youth mobilizations [21–23]. These efforts reflect both continuity and change in Palestinian feminist strategies and highlight the importance of contextual, intersectional, and historically grounded analysis.

Research questions

Building on the knowledge offered by feminist institutionalism, the goal of this research is to examine how

formal and informal institutional structures in Palestine influence, restrict, and occasionally facilitate women's political and public engagement. To explore these dynamics, the study employs carefully developed interview questions grounded in a thorough review of the literature on gender, politics, and Palestinian society, and informed by feminist institutionalist theory. The questions were refined through consultation with experts in political science and cultural studies to ensure clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness. Although a formal pilot was not conducted, the interview guide was pre-tested informally with knowledgeable individuals to confirm its effectiveness in eliciting rich and meaningful data. Through this approach, the study seeks to identify factors that hinder and encourage women's leadership and representation by analyzing the gendered character of political institutions and the sociocultural environment in which they function. In light of this theoretical orientation, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the current levels and patterns of women's political participation and leadership in Palestine?

RQ2: What socio-cultural, institutional, and structural challenges hinder women's access to and

exercise of power in political and public spheres, and how do these barriers affect their mental health, emotional resilience, and overall well-being?

RQ3: How have gender equality policies shaped the development of more inclusive and equitable political environments for Palestinian women?

Methods

Research design

This study adopts a qualitatively-driven mixed-methods approach to explore the levels, barriers, and policy impacts surrounding Palestinian women's political participation. The primary focus lies in the qualitative strand, which involves semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with women politicians, activists, and community members from diverse backgrounds. These methods aim to capture the complex socio-cultural, institutional, and structural factors that shape women's engagement in political life. Thematic analysis will guide the interpretation of participants' narratives, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns and deeper meanings. To situate these insights within a broader national context, quantitative data from sources such as the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and the Central Elections Commission will be analyzed. This numerical data will help map overall trends in women's political representation and provide a complementary backdrop to the qualitative findings.

Qualitative data collection

Qualitatively, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected sample of twenty Palestinian women actively involved in political and public life. The interview questions were developed by the researchers for this study. Participants include female politicians currently holding or who have previously held elected or appointed office, activists engaged in women's rights and political advocacy, and policy experts with deep knowledge of gender equality initiatives and political structures in Palestine.

Semi-structured interviews were used in order to offer a balance between flexibility and targeted inquiry. To address important topics such as the participants' political paths, perceived obstacles and enablers to involvement, experiences with institutional regulations and cultural norms, and viewpoints on gender equality initiatives, an interview guide comprising open-ended questions was employed. While enabling the interviewer to go deeper into pertinent subjects as they came up, this structure encouraged participants to tell their tales in their own words.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, several steps were taken to mitigate potential limitations associated with semi-structured interviews. First,

the interview guide was carefully reviewed to minimize leading or suggestive questions, ensuring that participants could express their experiences and perspectives freely. Second, the number and scope of questions were carefully balanced to avoid participant fatigue or overload, prioritizing key items aligned with the research objectives. Third, neutral language and standardized prompts were employed consistently across interviews to prevent unintended influence on participants' responses. These measures collectively aimed to maintain the objectivity, reliability, and authenticity of the data collected.

Interviews were conducted in Arabic, either in person or remotely, depending on logistical and security considerations, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Arabic was chosen as the primary language to ensure participants could express their experiences and perspectives comfortably and authentically. Each interview lasted approximately 35 to 60 minutes, enabling comprehensive discussion while respecting participants' time. Large Language Models (LLMs) including (Chat-GPT and Qwen) were utilized to translate the collected data and assist with language editing to ensure accuracy and clarity in the presentation of participants' narratives and research findings. To ensure the accuracy and contextual integrity of the data, all LLM-edited transcripts were carefully reviewed and manually cross-checked by a member of the research team holding an MA in Translation. This manual verification process was essential to correct any inaccuracies or misinterpretations introduced by automated processing and to maintain the reliability of the qualitative data for analysis.

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of certain topics, such as experiences with social media attacks or other distressing incidents, participants were informed in advance about the potential for discomfort. Interviews were conducted by a female GP, with care taken to monitor emotional responses, ensuring participants' well-being throughout the study. They were explicitly told that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. During interviews, care was taken to monitor participants' emotional state, with pauses or breaks offered as needed. Additionally, participants were provided with information on support resources should they experience distress, ensuring their well-being was prioritized throughout the research process.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity

This study was conducted by a multidisciplinary team of researchers, each bringing distinct perspectives and experiences that informed the research process. One author is a Palestinian general practitioner (GP) with

firsthand insight into the health and social conditions affecting Palestinian women. The second author is a professor of political science with extensive expertise in gender, governance, and Middle Eastern politics. The third author is a professor of cultural studies, also Palestinian, whose academic work focuses on representation, identity, and social power in colonial and postcolonial contexts. All three authors share a commitment to feminist and decolonial research ethics. Their positions—as scholars with both insider cultural knowledge and professional distance—shaped the formulation of research questions, the interpretation of participants' narratives, and the ethical handling of politically sensitive themes.

Data analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a rigorous qualitative method that identifies, analyzes, and reports patterns or themes within the data. This approach is particularly effective for exploring lived experiences and social phenomena, providing a structured yet flexible framework to interpret complex qualitative data.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process [31]: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; (2) initial coding to label meaningful units of text; (3) searching for themes by grouping related codes; (4) reviewing themes to ensure coherence and distinction; (5) defining and naming themes to capture their essence; and (6) producing the final report with illustrative quotes.

This method allowed for the identification of key barriers faced by Palestinian women, such as structural inequalities, cultural norms, institutional practices, and geopolitical constraints, as well as breakthroughs including policy reforms, civil society support, and individual resilience. By examining both challenges and enablers, the analysis sheds light on the institutional cultures and socio-political contexts that shape women's political participation in Palestine.

Participants

Twenty women between the ages of 25 and 60 make up the study sample, representing various generational viewpoints on political engagement. The age distribution includes 5 women aged 25–34 (young adults), 6 women aged 35–44 (early middle age), 5 women aged 45–54 (late middle age), and 4 women aged 55–60 (older adults). Their educational backgrounds vary, with 10 holding a Bachelor's degree, 7 a Master's degree, and 3 a PhD, reflecting a range of academic achievement and potential influences on political awareness.

Participants come from diverse geographic locations, including 9 women from cities (urban), 8 from villages (rural), and 3 from refugee camps, ensuring broad representation of Palestine's socioeconomic and

environmental contexts. The sample includes 7 single women, 10 married women, and 3 divorced or widowed women, which may influence their opportunities and experiences in political and public life.

Socioeconomic status is represented by 6 women from low, 9 from middle, and 5 from high socioeconomic backgrounds, highlighting disparities in access to resources and networks. In terms of religious and cultural background, 15 participants identify as Muslim, 3 as Christian, and 1 as Samaritan allowing analysis of how social acceptance and norms impact women's political engagement and leadership.

Results

Forms and levels of women's political participation and leadership in Palestine

Participation in the Palestine Liberation Organization, Palestinian Authority and Palestinian National Council

The Palestinian political system is characterized by a complex structure that includes institutions affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as well as those of the Palestinian Authority (PA). This description is based on a review of existing literature and official documents to provide necessary contextual background for the study.

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, is composed of several key bodies: the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the Central Council, and the Executive Committee. The PNC serves as the PLO's legislative body, representing Palestinians worldwide and setting broad policies and directions. The Central Council functions as an intermediary supervisory body that meets between PNC sessions to oversee implementation and make decisions on urgent matters. The Executive Committee acts as the PLO's executive leadership, responsible for day-to-day decision-making and managing political affairs. It was the Central Council that established the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the mid-1990s as part of the Oslo Accords framework. The PA, which administers limited self-governance in parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, consists primarily of two main bodies: the executive branch (the government) and the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).

Women continue to be underrepresented and unequally distributed throughout the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) official institutions [16]. Recent statistics show that the Central Council has the largest percentage of female members, with women making up 23.1% of the council's total membership [15]. However, only 17.4% of the members of the Palestinian National Council are female, indicating a lower level of

Table 1 Percentage of Women in Successive Palestinian Governments

Government term	Terms	Percent-age of Women (%)
Women in the nineteenth government	27 March 2006–17 March 2007	16.0
Women in the eighteenth government	17 March 2007–14 June 2007	11.5
Women in the seventeenth government	14 June 2007–15 September 2009	17.6
Women in the sixteenth government	15 September 2009–16 May 2012	12.5
Women in the fifteenth government	16 May 2012–6 June 2013	12.0
Women in the fourteenth government	6 June 2013–15 September 2013	20.8
Women in the thirteenth Government	15 September 2013–2 June 2014	21.7
Women in the twelfth government	2 June 2014–10 March 2019	8.7
Women in the eleventh government	10 March 2019–26 February 2024	8.0
Women in the tenth government	27 March 2006–17 March 2007	4.2

Note. Adapted from "Women and Men in Palestine: Issues and Statistics, 2023," by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [32]

female participation. Most notably, the Executive Committee has no female members at all; all of its members are men [15].

Participation in Palestinian governments

As shown in Table 1 below, the representation of women in the Palestinian government (Cabinet) has varied across different administrations. Notably, the thirteenth government marked a significant increase, with women holding 21.7% of cabinet positions—more than double the 8.7% in the twelfth government. This jump coincides with the introduction and gradual enforcement of gender quotas and greater advocacy for women's political inclusion during that period, reflecting a formal policy shift aimed at increasing female representation. The fourteenth government followed closely with 20.8%, and the seventeenth government with 17.6%. Subsequent governments maintained relatively high levels, with the nineteenth government at 16.0%, and the sixteenth and fifteenth governments at 12.5% and 12.0%, respectively. Earlier governments had significantly lower female participation, with the tenth government at just 4.2%. These figures highlight a fluctuating but generally upward trend in gender representation within the Palestinian Cabinet over time, influenced in part by institutional reforms promoting gender equality.

Table 2 Proportion of Seats Held by Women in the Palestinian Legislative Council by Region and Year (2014–2018)

Region	2014 (%)	2016 (%)	2017 (%)	2018 (%)
Gaza Strip	13.6	12.1	11.6	11.1
West Bank	12.5	11.6	11.1	11.3
Palestine (Total)	12.9	11.6	11.1	11.3

Note. Adapted from "Women and Men in Palestine: Issues and Statistics, 2023," by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [32]

Participation in the Palestinian legislative council

Women's political participation has witnessed a gradual decline mainly in the proportion of seats held by women in the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) between 2014 and 2018. As shown in Table 2, in 2014, women held 12.9% of seats nationwide, with the Gaza Strip showing a slightly higher representation (13.6%) compared to the West Bank (12.5%). By 2018, this proportion had dropped to 11.3% overall, reflecting a consistent downward trend in both regions.

Participation in local councils

The first local council elections in Palestine were held between 2004 and 2005, marking the beginning of formal decentralized governance. The second round followed in 2012 under the authority of the Central Elections Commission (CEC), which had assumed responsibility from the Higher Committee for Local Elections while retaining its role in presidential and legislative elections. A third round was conducted in 2017, followed by the fourth and most recent cycle in two phases: 11 December 2021 and 26 March 2022. With the exception of the inaugural elections, all subsequent rounds were limited to the West Bank, as no local elections have been held in the Gaza Strip since 2005.

The 2012 local elections were held amid ongoing political tensions and factional divisions, resulting in widespread boycotts and a high number of uncontested races. These conditions limited democratic participation and disproportionately affected female candidates. Nonetheless, women's candidacy increased modestly to 24%, up from 19% in the 2004–2005 elections. Notably, two all-women electoral lists were formed in an effort to challenge traditional clan-based nominations; however, neither succeeded in securing seats. Owing to the implementation of a gender quota, women ultimately won 21% of municipal council seats—an increase from 15% in previous elections. Yet, only 24% of elected women achieved their positions through competitive voting, while the remaining 76% were elected via quota allocation or unopposed acclamation.

In the fourth cycle of local elections, the CEC successfully administered elections across multiple municipalities. In the first phase (11 December 2021), 154 localities held contested elections, with over 260,000

voters participating—a turnout rate of 66%. Additionally, 162 localities filled seats via uncontested lists. Independent lists captured more than 70% of the 1,503 contested seats, compared to about 30% for party-affiliated lists. Women won 20.5% of contested seats—slightly lower than the 23% in uncontested elections. The second phase, held on 26 March 2022, covered 50 localities, with approximately 384,000 voters casting ballots—an overall turnout of 53.6%. Uncontested lists prevailed in 23 additional municipalities. Of the 632 contested seats, independent lists won 64.4%, while party lists secured 35.6%. Women's representation in contested races stood at 18%, compared to 20% in non-competitive contests (Table 3).

Women's participation in diplomacy

Women ambassadors

The representation of women among Palestinian ambassadors has shown a gradual increase over recent years. In 2019, women constituted 11% of the total ambassadors. By 2023, this figure had risen to 17%, indicating a positive trend toward greater gender inclusion at the highest levels of diplomatic leadership. However, despite this improvement, official records from 2020 show that women still represented only 10.8% of Palestinian ambassadors serving abroad (Figure 2).

Women in diplomatic missions abroad

In addition to ambassadorial roles, women also hold various positions within Palestinian diplomatic missions abroad. In 2020, women made up only 30.6% of the total personnel in these missions. This figure includes both diplomatic and administrative roles, indicating an under-representation of women across all professional levels within the diplomatic service.

The figure above illustrates the proportion of women and men in Palestinian foreign service positions in 2020. As shown in Chart 1, women constituted only 10.8% of ambassadors, whereas men accounted for 89.2%, under-scoring the significant gender disparity in top-level diplomatic appointments. In contrast, Chart 2 presents the composition of missions abroad, including both

Table 3 Women's Representation in Local Election Seats (Fourth Cycle, 2021–2022)

Women's Representation (%)	Phase 1 (11 Dec 2021)	Phase 2 (26 Mar 2022)
In Contested Seats	20.5	18
In Uncontested Seats	23	20

diplomats and administrative staff, where women represented 30.6% compared to 69.4% men.

Socio-cultural, institutional, and structural challenges

To better understand the lived realities of Palestinian women in relation to political engagement and public leadership, this study employed semi-structured interviews with twenty women aged 25 to 60 from diverse geographic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds across Palestine. The interviews aimed to explore the obstacles that hinder women's access to and exercise of power in political and public spheres. Participants shared personal insights and experiences, enabling a nuanced exploration of the socio-cultural, institutional, and structural challenges they encounter. In response to the guiding question, thematic analysis revealed multiple interrelated themes and subthemes, which are outlined in Table 4.

Socio-cultural challenges

Patriarchal norms and gender roles (85%)

A significant number of participants described how traditional gender expectations confine women to domestic and caregiving roles, limiting their time, legitimacy, and visibility in political life.

"In my family, being a wife and mother comes first. Politics is seen as a man's world. I was once told that 'a woman's voice is her modesty,' and that stayed with me for years." (Participant 3, age 35, married, rural). Another participant added, "Even when I want to attend meetings, I am expected to take care of the children first. My husband once said, 'Why

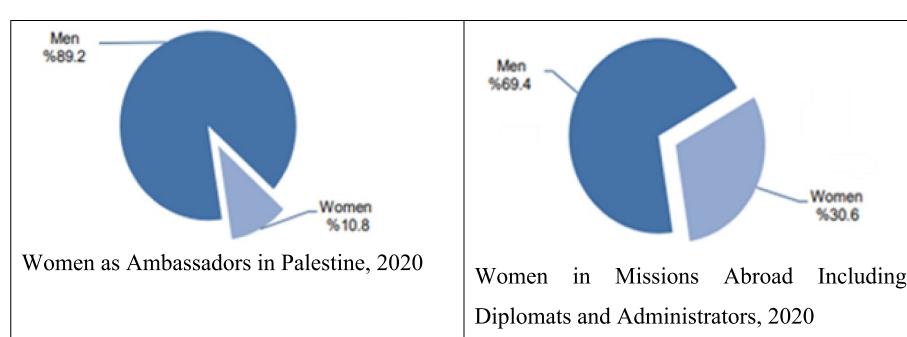


Fig. 2 Women's participation in Diplomacy in 2020

Table 4 Socio-Cultural, Institutional, and Structural Challenges Hindering Palestinian Women's Political Participation

Theme Category	Sub-Themes	Description	Participants Affected (n = 20)
Socio-Cultural	Patriarchal Norms and Gender Roles	Traditional expectations assign women domestic and care-giving roles, limiting time and social permission for political engagement.	17 (85%)
	Social Stigmatization and Stereotyping	Women face judgment or backlash when involved in politics, especially younger or single women.	13 (65%)
Institutional	Limited Political Representation	Despite activism, women are often excluded from formal decision-making processes and relegated to symbolic or supportive roles.	15 (75%)
	Weak Enforcement of International Frameworks	Participants felt that international resolutions (e.g., UNSC 1325) are not meaningfully implemented or monitored locally.	12 (60%)
	Underfunded Women's Organizations	Lack of funding prevents women-led NGOs from influencing public policies or sustaining empowerment programs.	10 (50%)
Structural	Economic Dependency and Barriers	Restricted employment and low wages, especially among rural and refugee camp residents, hinder financial independence and political activity.	14 (70%)

Table 4 (continued)

Theme Category	Sub-Themes	Description	Participants Affected (n = 20)
	Restricted Mobility and Securitization	Checkpoints, curfews, and security threats limit physical access to political events, education, and workplaces.	11 (55%)
	Gender Inequality in Digital Spaces	Women active online still face harassment or dismissal, especially when challenging traditional or nationalist narratives.	9 (45%)

The analysis reveals three interrelated categories of challenges: socio-cultural, institutional, and structural, each encompassing persistent constraints as well as emerging contradictions

waste your time on politics when the house is a mess?" (Participant 11, age 39, married, urban).

Yet, a few participants noted gradual shifts in their immediate circles, indicating that younger generations or educated families are beginning to challenge these norms. "My younger brother now encourages me to attend political meetings. He even shares my posts online. It's different from how my father thinks, but it gives me hope." (Participant 16, age 32, single, urban)

Social stigmatization and stereotyping (65%)

Several women, particularly unmarried or younger participants, described being socially stigmatized or dismissed when expressing political opinions or engaging in activism. A woman stressed this saying: "They say I'm too loud for a woman. When I attend political discussions, some men smirk as if I'm playing dress-up. It's hard to be taken seriously." (Participant 7, age 28, single, urban). Another living in the countryside stated: "My aunt told me that no man would marry me if I kept 'arguing like a politician.' The idea that being opinionated makes you undesirable is so common." (Participant 17, age 26, single, rural). Nonetheless, one participant emphasized that public support can be mobilized when women prove their competence by saying "People changed their tone after they saw I could organize events better than the men." (Participant 16, age 41, married, urban)

Institutional challenges

Limited political representation (75%)

Many participants expressed frustration at being excluded from decision-making spaces, despite their active involvement in grassroots or national movements. For example, a married woman argued that "Even when

we're involved in movements, we're rarely invited to speak. Men lead the marches, draft the statements, and we are asked to chant from the back." (*Participant 10, age 44, married, village*). Additionally, one divorced lady articulated that "When I ran for a local council seat, even women told me I was too bold. I lost not because I wasn't qualified, but because the system favors men." (*Participant 18, age 55, divorced, urban*). A few women, however, acknowledged incremental institutional openings due to quotas or international pressure, though these gains remain limited in scope. In this regard, one participant added "There are now some seats reserved for women in the council, which is a step forward, but often it feels like a token gesture. Real influence is still out of reach." (*Participant 9, age 43, married, city*)

Weak enforcement of international frameworks (60%)

Participants criticized the lack of tangible implementation of international agreements that aim to enhance women's political participation. A Palestinian lady "We hear a lot about international support, but we rarely see any real impact at the community level. It feels like slogans on paper with no meaningful change on the ground." (*Participant 5, age 40, divorced, refugee camp*). Another participant added "UN conferences sound impressive, but who benefits? Not women in the camps. We need action, not workshops." (*Participant 13, age 36, married, refugee camp*)

One participant with NGO experience offered a more cautious view saying "Frameworks like UN Security Council Resolution 1325 are tools, but if we don't push for local accountability, they won't work." (*Participant 1, age 46, married, urban*)

Underfunded women's organizations (50%)

Half the respondents highlighted that insufficient financial support for women-led civil society organizations undermines sustainable advocacy and empowerment efforts. One lady living in Hebron noted "We had a promising youth political program, but it was shut down after six months due to lack of funds. We felt silenced all over again." (*Participant 14, age 37, single, urban*). Another lady staying in Jenin in north West Bank added "We rely on volunteers because donors don't see women's leadership as a priority. It's hard to maintain momentum when you're always fundraising." (*Participant 6, age 42, married, urban*). Surprisingly, one participant living in a village close to Jericho suggested that internal organizational fragmentation also weakens effectiveness: "It's not just funding. Sometimes women's groups compete instead of collaborate." (*Participant 20, age 55, widow, village*)

Structural challenges

Economic dependency and barriers (70%)

Economic hardship, often intensified by occupation-related restrictions, was cited as a major constraint on political engagement, particularly for younger and single women. One single refugee articulated "How can I think of politics when I can barely afford transportation to the city? My job doesn't even cover my rent." (*Participant 12, age 30, single, refugee camp*). Another woman added "I want to attend trainings and conferences, but who pays for my time off work? Political participation feels like a luxury." (*Participant 9, age 45, married, rural*). However, one participant noted that women with family support or flexible jobs are sometimes able to overcome these barriers. She stressed the fact "Having my family's support made all the difference—I could attend meetings and speak out without fear. Plus, my flexible job lets me balance work and activism." (*Participant 9, age 38, married, urban*)

Restricted mobility and securitization (55%)

Checkpoints, military closures, and travel restrictions were widely seen as logistical and psychological deterrents to political activity. Due to Israeli occupation, Palestinians all face logistic difficulties. A woman argued "I missed a women's council meeting because the soldiers closed the checkpoint. They don't care if you're going to a hospital or a parliament." (*Participant 8, age 50, married, village*). Another added "Just walking into town becomes a negotiation with fear. Men don't understand the added fear we feel." (*Participant 4, age 29, single, refugee camp*)

A few urban participants suggested they experience fewer physical restrictions, although they expressed solidarity with women facing harsher conditions as noted by one woman who said "In the city, I have more freedom to move and join events, but I know that's not the case for everyone. My cousins in the village miss out on everything because of checkpoints." (*Participant 6, age 33, single, urban*)

Gender inequality in digital spaces (45%)

While social media platforms have expanded women's access to political discourse, they have also become spaces of harassment and gendered silencing. This section primarily focuses on women's experiences in social media environments, which emerged most prominently in the data. One participant shared, "Online, I get insulted for expressing political opinions. They say women should stay in the kitchen, not speak of revolutions." (*Participant 19, age 34, single, urban*). Another added, "I posted a critique of a political figure and got private messages threatening me. It's not just annoying—it's scary." (*Participant 2, age 31, married, urban*).

Still, some women view these platforms as liberating. As one young villager expressed, "It's the only place I can speak freely. I block the trolls and keep going" (Participant 15, age 27, single, village). Another added, "When I asked to get a smartphone for university, my elder brother said: 'You want it to chat with boys, not to study. It took months to convince them" (Participant 8, age 20, single, village).

Although few participants directly referenced formal governance or institutional responses to gender-based digital violence, the absence of such protections was implicitly felt in their accounts. The fear, resignation, and self-protective strategies described by participants point to a lack of effective mechanisms to safeguard women's digital presence. This gap highlights deeper structural and institutional dynamics that shape gendered access to and participation in digital political spaces.

Gender equality policies and equitable political environments
Gender equality policies in Palestine have yielded some formal achievements, such as the establishment of ministries and quotas. However, their influence on creating truly inclusive and equitable political environments for women remains superficial and structurally constrained.

Following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA), many women who had played prominent roles in grassroots mobilization during the First Intifada experienced a sharp decline in political visibility [21]. Their leadership positions were largely overshadowed by the rise of predominantly male political elites within the new institutional structures [21]. This shift reflects a broader tension between the goals of national liberation and the advancement of women's rights. As one refugee recounted: "We were on the frontlines during the Intifada. Then Oslo came, and suddenly we were invisible again" (Participant 9, age 54, ex-union organizer, refugee camp).

To address growing criticism about women's exclusion, the PA created the Ministry of Women's Affairs in 2003 and later gender units across all government agencies. However, participants frequently questioned the sincerity and impact of these moves. Many saw them as donor-driven efforts aimed more at appeasing international stakeholders than achieving genuine equality. One lady confirmed "These gender units exist in name only. They don't challenge power structures. They tick boxes for the donors." (Participant 7, age 45, NGO worker, urban)

The 20% gender quota in the Palestinian Legislative Council, secured in 2006 after years of advocacy, was hailed as a milestone. Yet, the actual representation and influence of women remain minimal. Political appointments are overwhelmingly controlled by the ruling Fatah party, and elite women with political backing are more likely to be selected, leaving out grassroots voices. A

senior academician stated "We got the quota, yes—but only women aligned with those in power benefit. Independent women are excluded." (Participant 4, age 39, academic, city)

Currently, only one woman serves on the PLO Executive Council (Hanan Ashrawi), and just one of 16 governors is female (Laila Ghannam of Ramallah and El-Bireh). While symbolic, these appointments do little to dismantle the patriarchal foundations of the PA's political structure.

Although the PA acceded to CEDAW in 2014 without reservations—becoming the first MENA government to do so—the commitment remains largely symbolic. The text was never published in the Official Gazette, and a 2017 ruling by the Palestinian Constitutional Court allows domestic courts to ignore international agreements if they conflict with local law. This legal loophole effectively shields the status quo from challenge. A senior lawyer said "We joined CEDAW, but on the ground, women are still unprotected. It's just for show." (Participant 11, age 50, lawyer, city)

The gendered nature of political repression—whether by Israeli forces or the PA—has further discouraged women's political engagement. From verbal harassment and surveillance to physical assault during demonstrations, women face specific forms of violence meant to shame and silence them. The PA, particularly in recent years, has adopted tactics strikingly similar to those used by the Israeli occupation. One participant complained "If you speak out, they don't just target you—they go after your father, your boss, your reputation." (Participant 6, age 33, activist, village)

At a 2018 protest against PA sanctions on Gaza, women were harassed and assaulted by Fatah loyalists, sending a clear message that public space was not safe for politically active women.

Despite this, women continue to resist through creative strategies—remaining in groups at demonstrations, mentally preparing for harassment, and building collective solidarity. "I go to protests knowing what might happen. But if we stop, they win." (Participant 8, age 28, student, urban)

Impact of political participation and exclusion on mental health

The emotional and psychological effects of political participation and exclusion reported by participants can be understood through feminist lenses of emotional labor and embodied politics. Women's engagement in politics involves not only navigating institutional barriers and patriarchal hostility but also performing continuous emotional regulation, managing social scrutiny, and bearing the embodied toll of exclusion and violence [16, 29]. This section explores how such gendered emotional

and physical burdens manifest in the mental health experiences of Palestinian women activists and politicians.

Many participants highlighted that the burden of navigating a deeply patriarchal political system, coupled with institutional neglect and structural violence, has tangible effects on their mental and physical well-being.

Several women spoke of the psychological toll of being marginalized, dismissed, or threatened when attempting to engage politically. This was especially common among younger activists and women from rural or refugee communities as stressed here “Every time I raise my voice, I’m reminded I don’t belong. It’s exhausting. I’ve had anxiety attacks before meetings because I know I’ll be interrupted or ignored.” (*Participant 11, age 29, single, urban*). Another participant added “Being politically active means you’re watched, judged. I don’t sleep well the night before a protest—my mother worries something will happen to me.” (*Participant 6, age 22, student, refugee camp*)

The fear of harassment—both online and in public spaces—further contributes to emotional fatigue as stated here by one participant “After my name was mentioned in a Facebook post attacking women activists, I felt violated. I didn’t leave the house for days. The stress gave me migraines and I started seeing a therapist.” (*Participant 17, age 33, divorced, urban*)

Participants also noted that political participation often entails physical risks, especially in confrontational environments like protests or during encounters with security forces. A villager living near Tulkarm city claimed “At that protest, I wasn’t just pushed—I was groped by a soldier when they grabbed me. I screamed, but no one could do anything. For days after, I couldn’t eat or sleep. It wasn’t just physical pain—it was the feeling that my body was used to shame me into silence.” (*Participant 8, age 35, married, village*). Some described how the physical strain of activism—long hours, poor transportation access, or lack of basic services—impacted their general health. One of the participant noted “We often travel for hours to attend meetings. There are no proper facilities, not even restrooms. I got a urinary infection once after spending a whole day in the heat without water.” (*Participant 15, age 40, single, camp resident*)

Despite these challenges, many women emphasized their resilience and the role of collective support in maintaining their well-being. A local council member argued “We may suffer, but we support each other. I attend a small circle with other activists—just talking helps relieve the pressure.” (*Participant 3, age 38, married, urban*); another woman who is a mother of three children added “My daughters are proud of me. That gives me strength, even when I feel drained.” (*Participant 10, age 45, mother of four, rural*)

Discussion

Despite some progress, Palestinian women remain significantly underrepresented in political leadership, reflecting a global trend in which formal gender equality reforms often fail to translate into substantive political power [1, 4]. In Palestine, this disparity is further exacerbated by sociopolitical fragmentation, entrenched patriarchal norms, and the ongoing Israeli occupation, which collectively restrict women’s access to meaningful decision-making roles.

Symbolic gains—such as women occupying 23.1% of seats in the PLO Central Council and 21.7% of Cabinet positions—obscure deeper exclusion from high-level political authority. The absence of women in the PLO Executive Committee and the declining representation in the Palestinian Legislative Council (11.3% by 2018) suggest that inclusion often remains tokenistic [9]. Political will for gender inclusion is inconsistent; gains in some administrations are often followed by regression in others due to the absence of permanent, enforceable gender-sensitive mechanisms like quotas or institutional audits [2].

At the municipal level, gender quotas have contributed to incremental improvements, yet most women gain office through quotas or acclamation rather than open competition. Tribal affiliations, patriarchal party structures, and social stigma continue to curtail women’s political influence, mirroring global concerns that descriptive representation rarely ensures substantive change [3]. Diplomatic gains, where women now constitute 30.6% of diplomats, represent modest progress concentrated primarily in lower ranks [5].

Structural barriers intersect to reinforce women’s political exclusion. Patriarchal norms, gendered expectations, and political repression—particularly targeting unmarried or outspoken women—serve as informal gatekeeping mechanisms that limit women’s visibility and credibility in public life. Participants highlighted how familial obligations and societal stigma function to restrict women’s political roles. Although younger women increasingly challenge these norms through education and digital activism, they confront new risks such as online harassment and reputational threats [7, 8].

Institutionally, formal reforms like CEDAW ratification and UNSCR 1325 commitments have yet to achieve consistent enforcement. Gender units within ministries are often perceived as symbolic or donor-driven rather than transformative. As Waylen (2014) [27] argued, quotas frequently elevate elite women while sidelining grassroots voices, thus reinforcing clientelist and patriarchal hierarchies. Legal ambiguities—such as rulings permitting the bypass of international conventions—further weaken reform implementation and expose gains to potential reversal [2, 27].

Applying an intersectional lens reveals how gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and refugee status intersect to shape Palestinian women's lived experiences and resistance strategies [33]. Palestinian women face a compounded burden wherein gender-specific barriers intersect with the structural violence of military occupation. They contend not only with societal norms and gender-based violence but also with the overarching realities of occupation and displacement, which jointly restrict their roles and amplify their challenges [34, 35].

The socio-political environment further complicates women's activism and resistance. Palestinian refugees, in particular, experience compounded vulnerabilities due to displacement, statelessness, and socioeconomic deprivation, alongside ongoing military occupation [36–38]. These intersecting identities and conditions shape not only their activism but also the forms of resilience they cultivate [34, 36].

Despite systemic barriers, Palestinian women exhibit remarkable resilience and agency. Through grassroots organizing, digital engagement, and civil society participation, many have carved alternative spaces for political expression and influence. These adaptive strategies, especially among younger generations, challenge entrenched patriarchal and militarized nationalism, illustrating the utility of feminist institutionalism in understanding how informal norms, party hierarchies, and nationalist frameworks obstruct women's political inclusion [25, 26].

While institutional reforms have yielded formal gains, they have yet to transform the underlying gendered power relations. Without systemic change to informal institutions and political culture, Palestinian women's political participation risks remaining fragile, uneven, and largely symbolic.

The psychological and physical toll of political participation in this patriarchal and militarized context is well-documented globally and within Palestine. Palestinian women, particularly younger and marginalized groups, often experience emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and somatic symptoms due to the stresses of activism in repressive environments [13, 21]. Kayali (2024) highlights how resistance strategies are shaped amid persistent gendered insecurity and neoliberal co-optation, emphasizing the emotional labor involved [21]. Similarly, Goodfriend (2022) describes political engagement as a survival tactic that comes with significant emotional strain [13].

Experiences of marginalization, harassment—including online abuse—and exclusion from formal political spaces contribute to chronic stress and psychological harm [11, 19, 22]. These effects are compounded by the internalized experience of being interrupted or dismissed in political discourse, a common phenomenon in gendered political contexts [25, 26].

Physical symptoms such as headaches and infections exemplify how political exclusion and patriarchal repression translate into tangible bodily harm and declining health, as argued in feminist political theory [5, 18]. Globally, women in patriarchal or militarized systems face disproportionate psychological burdens when institutions fail to provide adequate protection [4, 39].

Nonetheless, emotional resilience and coping mechanisms—such as collective care, solidarity networks, and familial pride—serve as vital buffers. Many women draw strength from their activist identities, social roles, and peer connections [12, 20, 21]. This reflects broader feminist research demonstrating that collective solidarity can mitigate, though not eliminate, the emotional costs of political exclusion [10, 28].

Conclusion

This study reveals the complex and often contradictory nature of gender equality policies in Palestine. While formal institutional gains such as gender quotas and dedicated ministries symbolize progress, they remain largely superficial, failing to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms or deliver substantive political empowerment for women. The persistence of informal barriers—including legal ambiguities, political repression, and elite gatekeeping—reflects how deeply gendered power dynamics continue to shape Palestinian institutions and limit women's meaningful political involvement.

Applying a Feminist Institutionalist framework highlights that meaningful change requires more than symbolic reforms; it demands confronting the informal rules and norms that sustain exclusion. Despite these systemic challenges, Palestinian women's ongoing resilience and strategic activism demonstrate alternative pathways for political participation beyond formal institutions, indicating a vibrant, if constrained, political involvement at grassroots and civil society levels.

This research underscores the need to move beyond superficial measures and donor-driven initiatives toward genuine structural reforms that enhance women's political participation. Strengthening legal protections, promoting judicial independence, and supporting grassroots leadership development are essential to increase women's influence in decision-making processes. Furthermore, addressing gendered political repression by implementing protective mechanisms can enable more women to engage safely and effectively in public and political life. International donors and local stakeholders must align efforts to ensure gender equality policies support meaningful political involvement, grounded in the lived realities of Palestinian women.

This study's qualitative approach provides in-depth insights but is limited in scope and generalizability. The sample size and focus on particular geographic and social

contexts within Palestine may not capture the full diversity of women's political experiences, especially in Gaza or among marginalized groups. Additionally, access constraints due to political instability affected the breadth of data collection. Future research could incorporate larger, mixed-methods designs to validate and expand these findings across different Palestinian regions and communities.

Building on this work, future studies should explore the intersections of gender with other axes of identity such as class, ethnicity, and refugee status to better understand differentiated barriers and opportunities for political involvement. Comparative research across occupied and non-occupied territories could illuminate how political context shapes women's empowerment and participation. Moreover, longitudinal studies tracking the impact of emerging digital activism and youth movements on gender norms would provide valuable perspectives on evolving strategies for inclusion in Palestinian political life.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the qualitative sample comprised exclusively college-educated Palestinian women, including politicians, activists, and policy experts. While this group provides valuable insights into women's political participation, their experiences may not fully represent the broader population of Palestinian women, particularly those with less formal education or from more marginalized communities. Second, the study's qualitatively-driven mixed-methods design, though rich in depth, limits the generalizability of the results, especially given the relatively small sample size of twenty interviewees. Third, data collection was influenced by the ongoing political instability and restrictions within Palestine, which may have constrained access to certain regions or populations, potentially biasing the data. Finally, while quantitative data from official sources provided important contextualization, these sources may have limitations in accuracy or completeness due to the complex and fragmented political environment. Future research with larger and more diverse samples, including longitudinal and comparative designs, would help to address these limitations and provide a more comprehensive understanding of Palestinian women's political participation.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-025-24958-5>.

Supplementary material 1.

Acknowledgements

The author extends sincere gratitude to all the women who participated in the study and shared their experiences. Special thanks to colleagues and mentors who provided feedback and support throughout the research process. Appreciation is also due to the translators and editors who supported language refinement using large language models (LLMs).

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conception, design, data collection, and analysis of the study. OJ wrote the initial draft and finalized the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version.

Funding

This research received no external funding or any other form of funds.

Data availability

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with participants but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study, which involved in-depth qualitative interviews, was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from An-Najah National University institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent after being informed of the study's purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of participation.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Received: 31 May 2025 / Accepted: 16 September 2025

Published online: 28 October 2025

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