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Women's political agency in difficult settings: Analysis of evidence from Egypt, Nigeria, Mozambique, and Pakistan

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Summary

Motivation: Male gatekeeping and biased social norms in difficult settings characterized by fragility, authoritarianism, and conflict create challenges for women's political participation. This article explores the nature of challenges experienced by women and how they exercise political agency in such settings—as voters, claimants, and brokers of services, and as activists.

Purpose: I investigate the range of expressions of women's political agency and responses they secure from public authorities in difficult settings. I ask the question: how and to what effect do women exercise political agency in difficult settings? Analysis of the range of expressions of political agency allows a broader view of women's engagement in politics.

Methods and approach: The article develops a framework to identify the range of expressions of women's individual and collective agency from Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) studies conducted in Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan. This synthesis explores social norms and male gatekeeping; strategies women use to navigate these and limit backlash; and the changes that result from women taking action.

Findings: Evidence shows that social norms and male gatekeeping limit women's engagement in politics and their

relations with multiple public authorities that operate in difficult settings. Women use gender-specific repertoires to organize protests and make claims on authorities and specific strategies to reduce the risk of backlash from their own communities and security agencies. The findings show that, while there is some success in claim-making on specific issues and that at a personal level women feel more empowered, these do not necessarily lead to systemic change.

Policy implications: Donors and local authorities need to develop interventions that tackle male gatekeeping within political parties and communities to facilitate women's political engagement. Flexibility in funding will enable donors to work directly or indirectly with grassroots and national women's rights groups in difficult settings for developing contextualized, bottom-up interventions. Strengthening pro-gender-equality alliances and spaces for deliberation will help to ensure that gender equality is not co-opted by authoritarian leaders and populist groups and will sustain counter-narratives.

KEYWORDS
Egypt, male gatekeeping, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, restrictive social norms, women-led protests, women's political agency

1 | INTRODUCTION

In many countries, women's political agency is limited because of social and cultural norms. In "difficult settings" these norms interact with the dynamics of ongoing conflict, restricted civic space, legacies of authoritarian rule, and the presence of multiple public authorities—which pose additional challenges for women's political action. Violence or the threat of violence limit women's decisions to engage politically, especially since sexual and gender-based violence is commonly enacted during conflict (Moser & Clark, 2001). Conflicts over natural resources can lead to loss of livelihoods and displacement, and can create gender-specific vulnerabilities (Bradshaw et al., 2017). Identity-based disputes can retrench restrictive gender norms and limit women's political agency as public authorities valorize harmful traditions. While women disproportionately suffer the consequences of conflict, they are also the keenest to secure responses from powerholders on matters that affect them. The key question, then, is how do women exercise political agency in difficult settings, and with what effects?

To address this question, I focus on the following three aspects. First, the ways gender norms and male gatekeepers limit women's political agency in difficult settings; second, how women strategically navigate these constraints and how their expression of political agency is gendered; and third, the kinds of response women secure from public authorities and whether these lead to a change in the relationship between them and the powerholders.

I draw on various bodies of literature, including Women, Peace and Security (WPS), gender and politics, and contentious politics to analyse evidence from the Action for Empowerment and Accountability Research Programme's (A4EA) research on women's political agency. I examined 18 case studies by A4EA researchers on women's electoral

participation and social and political action from Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan for evidence on: (1) women-led protests on gender equality, and/or protests with significant female participation at the local, subnational or national levels; and (2) how social norms and informal practices create barriers to women exercising political agency as community leaders, political intermediaries, and voters. The findings were thematically clustered and analysed to unpack how and to what effect women exercise political agency in difficult settings. It should be noted that I was not directly involved in the primary data collection for the A4EA research. However, as a workstream lead, I commented on the research design and reviewed several of the outputs on gender for the research conducted in Mozambique, Pakistan, and Nigeria, and synthesized findings for the overall workstream. I also commented on the quality of data and findings for the research on the women's movement in Egypt, Nigeria, and Pakistan in phase 1 of the research.

Based on my analysis of the evidence, I argue that in difficult settings, women mediate "sticky" gender norms enforced by (male) gatekeepers to participate in formal and protest politics, or to act as intermediaries in resolving community problems. Violation of these norms can lead to backlash from enforcers—women's families and various public authorities. As a result, women remain relatively invisible in formal politics, but they do participate in protest activities. Women's repertories of contention tend to be gender-specific, drawing attention to their roles as carers to make claims on the public space. These gender-specific framings can reduce the risk of backlash from male gate-keepers, but in the long run reinforce restrictive gender norms. Women's participation in protests, however, can allow them to develop a sense of critical awareness and collective identity, public speaking skills, and their own networks. But whether these changes at the personal level create a legacy for women as claimants, a shift in public authorities recognizing their obligation to women, and a change in discourse on women's rights, remains to be seen.

In Section 2, I define the key concepts and draw on relevant bodies of work to identify components for exploring the range of political agency expressed by women in difficult settings. In Section 3, I provide details of the A4EA case studies and their country contexts. In Section 4, I explore how social norms and male mediation limit individual women's political agency as voters, claimants and as intermediaries. In Section 5, I analyse the way women use gendered repertoires to minimize risk of backlash from their community and security forces, and what enables this agency. In Section 6, I reflect on what the A4EA findings illuminate about women's political empowerment and accountability relations with multiple authorities. In the conclusion (Section 7), I focus on what the findings mean for researching women's empowerment and public authorities answering to women, and for programming on strength-ening women's leadership and political agency in settings characterized by fragility, conflict, and violence.

2 | WOMEN'S POLITICAL AGENCY IN DIFFICULT SETTINGS

How did A4EA define difficult settings? Difficult settings are places where there are contestations between several state and non-state actors, all of whom seek to gain resources, power, and legitimacy. The presence of multiple public authorities with some legitimacy, who provide services and hold power, makes it difficult to ascertain which actor has obligations for which public goods and for the provision of security. In difficult settings states have low levels of legitimacy among certain population groups, governance structures are weak, and civic space for dissent restricted. The settings may or may not be marked by ongoing conflict along ethnic or religious lines in certain areas, and legacies of authoritarian rule mean that the military has significant presence in politics and governments can be intolerant of dissent (Joshi, 2023). Not all difficult settings are failed states, but some have hybrid forms of governance, i.e. non-state authorities may fill the gaps that states fail to address (Justino, 2019). These features have implications for women's political engagement.

It should be noted that, in difficult settings, colonial historical legacies may have created cleavages between different social groups and shape what citizens expect from the state. With respect to gender, it is important to take into account how the "woman question" (i.e. women's role in the modern nation state) has been resolved, and what tensions are still prevalent regarding this issue between different social groups, and what women can claim from the state (Chatterjee, 1990). Conservative social norms that shape views on women's presence in public and their partic-ipation in politics interact with these factors and can limit women's ability to exercise political agency.

While women face challenges in exercising political agency in most stable settings (Waylen et al., 2013), in difficult contexts, women as political actors face dilemmas due to the distance between actors who are providing services and shaping social relations, and actors with formal obligations to respond. Moreover, being seen to be too close to particular actors can become problematic for women when making claims. Navigating these tensions requires tactics and strategies to advance claims without triggering backlash from powerholders. Nuances in the political configurations in such spaces can be more difficult for women to discern given their limited access to public spaces and male-dominated networks.

Viewed through the lens of difficult settings, an analysis of women's agency moves us beyond a focus on state-centric security and governance failures and enables an examination of household (micro-) and community (meso)-level actors. It allows for an examination of how male authority at the household and community levels controls women's access to state and non-state authorities. This focus on the link between public–private spheres is useful, as many of the interactions between citizens and the state in such settings are governed by informal non-public arrangements and institutions. Male mediation of women's access to and relationship with public authorities further weakens women's tenuous link with them.

Agency is defined by feminist scholars as the ability to make strategic life choices on issues that affect one's wellbeing and interests, and can be exercised by individuals or collective groups (Kabeer, 1999). Women's ability to exercise political agency is shaped by individual circumstances and the structural constraints that distribute power and privilege to different social groups unequally. I identify three different components of political agency: critical consciousness about one's interests and wellbeing; ability to voice[1] one's interests; and action to secure these interests (voting, standing for office, brokering, and mobilizing). Expressions of collective political agency require women to mobilize around a specific group interest, at times these may pertain to gender transformative changes (Agarwal, 2010).

In gender and politics literature, women's agency is discussed with respect to the various roles they play, with an emphasis on women's representation in formal politics. Women's preference in voting, and the barriers they face in exercising their voting rights have been explored in the literature (Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Iyer & Mani, 2019). While much of the literature on women's political participation focuses on individual women's lack of education and the care burden that constrains their agency, that is to say supply-side factors, studies also analyse demand-side factors such as how political parties engage with women (Lovenduski & Norris, 1993). Moving beyond the individual factors that constrain women's agency as voters and exploring male gatekeeping at the political party level (Chappell & Mackay, 2017) is an important aspect for unpacking how social norms are enforced by male public authorities.

Gender and politics literature also explores women's representation and what factors enable them to become "critical actors" (Childs & Krook, 2009). These factors include political transitions creating openings for women, and networking between women representatives and activists (Htun & Weldon, 2018; Waylen, 2015). Some recent gender and politics literature explores how informal norms and practices influence women's agency by analysing political recruitment and policy processes and the role of informal networks and homosocial capital (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2017; Franceschet, 2017).[2] These concepts are useful for examining how women intermediaries mitigate gendered barriers and negotiate with public authorities, and how women protestors access formal political spaces to be heard.

Expressions of women's political agency include mobilizing collectively to engage in formal consultative spaces. Contentious politics (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) and feminist movement literature (Beckwith, 2013; Molyneux, 2001) are helpful for exploring how women frame demands and "perform protest acts" (Butler, 2015). Contentious politics literature also helps to unpack the role of mainstream and social media and the kinds of alliances women's movements form to strengthen collective voice.

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[1]The ability to articulate one's views and opinions (Goetz & Hassim, 2003).

[2]In politics homosocial capital refers to informal same-sex networks (in this case all male) that are used for dominance and interest in terms of political recruitment, access, and opportunities for advancement. Studies have shown that women have formed informal all-female networks to promote their interests, but these are fewer and far between.

TABLE 1 Expressions of women's political agency in difficult settings.

Space	Expressions of agency		
	Individual		**Collective**
Informal	Claimants	Intermediaries	Protestors
Formal	Voters	Elected officials	Social movement activists

Source: author.

I am grateful to Anu Joshi for her input.

In difficult settings, both individual women protestors and collective groups face gender-specific threats. Women's political agency in these contexts is mediated by many factors. The WPS literature helps to unpack the gendered repertoire of protests and gender-specific patterns of risks. It highlights how social norms around mobility and access to the public sphere, high levels of violence, and biased perceptions of state agents and non-state powerholders (clan leaders, armed groups) who disregard or actively suppress women's agency, create multiple barriers to women's political participation (Cockburn, 2001). WPS literature also reveals how women emphasize their role as mothers to make demands for security and to mitigate risk. Women strategically use "political motherhood" (Schirmer, 1993; Werbner, 1999) to reclaim public space.[3]

Using these above bodies of work, I identify the range of agency that A4EA researchers found in difficult settings. This includes: voting, candidacy, representation, informally acting as intermediaries between claimants and public authorities for services, and protest activities (see Table 1).

3 | A4EA COUNTRY CONTEXT AND CASE STUDIES

A4EA research investigated: the barriers women face as voters and, to some extent, as candidates and representatives; the constraints imposed on women intermediaries at the local level and the strategies they use; and the ways women activists and social movement actors negotiate demands with public authorities. On the political barriers, I draw on research from Nigeria (Oladapo et al., 2021) and Pakistan (Cheema et al., 2022) on the gender gap in voting and on male gatekeeping in urban governance. To explore the role of women intermediaries, I use findings from the governance at the margins comparative study from Mozambique, Myanmar, and Pakistan (Barnes et al., 2021).

To examine women's participation in protest activities, I draw on research from Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan. The cases include: campaigns to demand accountability with respect to sexual harassment in universities in Egypt; the Chiango protests led by women demanding road safety and public-service delivery in Mozambique; and the Bring Back Our Girls (#BBOG) women-led movement in Nigeria that emerged from the abduction of 276 school girls in Chibok by Boko Haram. I also use findings from a range of women-led protests that focused on sexual violence, misogyny, labour, and citizenship rights in Pakistan.

All of the A4EA focus countries are democratically weak with high levels of political violence and state surveillance and have experienced authoritarian regimes and violent conflict (Gaventa, 2023). In recent years they witnessed increased levels of public protest and a closure of civic space (Anderson et al., 2021). There are, however, variations between them in the degree to which political freedoms have eroded. The history of colonial repression and authoritarian regimes has shaped state–citizen relations in specific ways, resulting in people's interactions with the state being shaped by fear, repression, and low expectations of the state (Joshi, 2023). State agencies in these countries remain deeply patriarchal, however as the state is not monolithic (Staudt, 1998), there are parts of the state that do promote gender-equality concerns and women's rights. For women facing local patriarchal pressures in these

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[3]Political motherhood explores how women use culturally defined female roles and qualities as nurturers and carers of family and society and draw attention to how public authorities fail to enable women to fulfil these roles. Werbner (1999) points out that political motherhood is a process through which women reconstitute terms of citizenship based on feminine qualities and claim public space.

contexts, turning towards the sympathetic parts of the state is a way to counter the local community or non-state authorities. It should be noted that our case studies were not carried out in parts of the countries where misogynist militias or extremist groups are in power, where women may have limited recourse to make demands. This means that sometimes women were able to demand answers as a constituency from the state actors.

Formally, the constitutions of the four countries guarantee equal participation of women in politics, but their participation is limited in multiple ways. None of the countries has gender parity in their lower houses of parliament. Mozambique leads with 42% followed by Egypt (28%) and Pakistan (20%), and finally Nigeria at 3.6% (IPU, 2021). Generally, political parties do not perceive women as viable political leaders or candidates (Cheema et al., 2019; Oladapo et al., 2021; Tadros, 2014).

Colonialism has shaped the gender power relations in these countries as colonial rulers codified laws and set the boundaries of power for traditional institutions (McClintock, 1995). What women can claim in these postco-lonial states with respect to politics depends on how women's entitlement was defined when independence was negotiated, and the legacy of the women's movement (Jayawardena, 1986; Nazneen et al., 2019). In three of the Muslim-majority countries, how "the woman question" (Chatterjee, 1990) was settled has been contested by extrem-ist groups and religious political parties—in Khybar Paktunkhwa (KP) in Pakistan by the Taliban, in Northern Nigeria by Boko Haram, and in Egypt by the Muslim Brotherhood.

While none of the countries is a theocracy, religion has been politicized by conservative political forces and armed groups, which creates difficulties for the promotion of certain types of gender-equality concerns pertaining to women's bodily and sexual autonomy, and presence in leadership roles. Sharia law defines women's personal rights (in marriage, divorce, inheritance) in Pakistan, Egypt, and parts of Northern Nigeria, meaning they lack equal rights and have limited legal personhood. These limits reinforce restrictive social norms on women's agency within the household and the community. For example, an A4EA survey conducted on intra-household decision-making in urban centres in Pakistan and Nigeria showed women had limited agency compared to men as regards taking the COVID-19 vaccine. Of the 3000 men and women surveyed in Lahore, only 7% of women said they could decide on their own whether to take the COVID-19 vaccine, compared to 73% of men (Cheema, Khan et al., 2021). In Lagos, about 68% of women said they could decide on their own compared to 83% of men (PASGR, 2022).

4 | INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

4.1 | Women as voters and claimants

Research on women's voting patterns in urban areas in Pakistan reveals a significant gender gap. Using the Election Commission of Pakistan's gender-disaggregated constituency-level dataset for the 2018 elections, the study found that women's electoral participation is 8.5% lower in metropolitan areas than rural areas (Cheema, Liaqat et al., 2021). This urban–rural gap in voting among women is also mirrored by a higher gender gap in voting in terms of men's and women's presence at the polls in metropolitan areas compared to rural areas. The gap in electoral participation among women in metropolitan areas could not be explained using conventional predictors for low participation: the burden of care work, lack of education, or low labour-force participation (Cheema et al., 2019; Cheema, Liaqat et al., 2021). Similar research in Nigeria revealed gender gaps in voting between the North and South, which again could not be explained by the usual predictors (Oladapo et al., 2021). In fact, voting among women in the South was higher among less educated women. These findings indicate the need to go beyond usual explanations for why women fail to exercise political agency.

While the above findings are not specific to difficult settings, they highlight how social norms adversely affect individual political agency in terms of voting (Cheema et al., 2019; Oladapo et al., 2021). Restrictive social norms regarding female mobility and presence in public are connected to notions that women's bodies, actions, and extra-household relationships are inextricably linked to family honour and should be controlled. Husbands' control over wives' extra-household relations affects how women participate in politics. Fear of being sanctioned by family or

community members for violating such norms limits women's political agency (Cheema, Liaqat et al., 2021; Oladapo et al., 2021). The Lahore study found direct links between men's negative views of women's independent political action and low electoral turnout of women in the same households (Cheema et al., 2022).

A deeper exploration of "male gatekeeping" reveals how it constrains individual women's actions with respect to voting, candidacy, and participation in political meetings, even when women have the material resources and the desire to engage. Male gatekeepers limit women's access to shared household resources and the time needed for political participation. The Pakistan research on women's voting revealed the strength of sticky social norms on "the gendered logic of appropriateness" of women's behaviour (Chappell & Mackay, 2017). Most of the women surveyed in the Lahore study felt they would be permitted by male household members to vote, but only one third thought they would have permission to attend an election meeting, and only 18% thought they could attend an election rally (Cheema et al., 2022). Phase 2 of the same study revealed that male political party workers held adverse views on female candidacy and activism at the local level, and parties did little to change biased attitudes. Most of the women surveyed reported that they felt invisible and irrelevant to the electoral process (Cheema et al., 2019).

While biased social norms and male gatekeeping are not specific to difficult settings, they do play a significant role in constraining women's ability to make claims on the multiple authorities that often exist in such places. The A4EA "Governance at the Margins" research (see Anderson et al., 2023) used household diaries over a 12-month period to explore how governance problems are experienced by the poor in Mozambique, Myanmar, and Pakistan. It found that individual women make claims for better services to public authorities on health, access to finance, land disputes, and justice issues. However, these claims are fewer than men's in the communities studied. Women's access to services is mediated through male family members and mostly male intermediaries within their community (Barnes et al., 2021).

Male mediation is an additional hurdle for poor women besides the logistical and social barriers that make direct access to public authorities difficult. Women's reliance on male gatekeepers is hardly surprising given the restrictive norms and the fact that men possess greater power within both formal representative and informal power structures in the communities studied. What is concerning is that the local authorities make no special provisions to help women overcome these disadvantages as they consider it normal for women to rely on men (A4EA, 2021). In addition, development programmes operating at the local level in the communities studied are gender-blind as they assume that women have the same access as men (A4EA, 2021). Male mediation and gender-blind programming constrain women's agency when it comes to demanding answers from public authorities. Women lack independent resources, power, and channels to voice concerns, creating a perverse loop as public authorities remain uninformed or less informed about women's needs or claims.

4.2 | Women as intermediaries

In difficult settings the role of intermediary is critical for dealing with multiple authorities and gaining access to goods and services. How do individual women intermediaries navigate social norms and various male gatekeepers?

The A4EA Governance at the Margins research mentioned above also investigated the role of intermediaries in mediating access to services and protection for poor households. Unsurprisingly, given the barriers to women's political participation, the researchers found fewer female than male intermediaries. Many of the female intermediaries belonged to influential families and gained access to the political arena through familial pathways whereas others gained entry to public forums through informal quotas. For example, in Mozambique, the female intermediaries joined neighbourhood groups and community forums through informal quotas endorsed by political parties at the local level (A4EA, 2020a).

The selected male and female intermediaries were tracked over a period to explore how they mediated on behalf of others. They were approached to mediate on similar issues—access to state services, family and land disputes, and security concerns. Women were publicly acknowledged by the community as legitimate authorities for mediating on "women's issues" such as reproductive health, domestic violence, child welfare, and sexual violence.

Some of the female intermediaries in their interviews stated that they also perceived themselves as representatives of women's interests (A4EA, 2021). However, whether promotion of gender-equality concerns motivated them to mediate on behalf of women claimants or whether they were motivated by the need to protect their family's influence is difficult to discern from the existing data as the focus of the unstructured interviews did not address these issues. What can be gauged from the various repeat interviews is that women intermediaries faced significant gendered barriers in their work compared to male intermediaries. Effective female intermediaries are from well-off classes or an ethnic background that are influential, and from families that allow women to participate in politics (A4EA, 2021).

The female intermediaries studied use a range of strategies to navigate social norms and male gatekeeping. For example, in Pakistan one used her son as her proxy to co-ordinate with the mediation panel in her village, as she is not allowed to access this male space. She also took advantage of gender segregation to actively use the female spaces to mobilize women (A4EA, 2020b). In Mualadzi in Mozambique, female intermediaries strategically involve male members of community forums to resolve conflicts on "male issues" such as land disputes, even when they are the ones approached (A4EA, 2020a). These examples from Pakistan and Mozambique illustrate that at times the strategies the female intermediaries use to navigate social norms reinforce gender norms on sex segregation and sex roles.

Interpersonal relations and social capital based on kinship and other associations are key for female intermediaries to navigate the politics of deal-making. In Mozambique, female intermediaries use neighbourhood groups, and/or community organizations they belong to, to mediate conflicts. In Pakistan, the women use kinship networks to access information and political spaces. These findings on the significance of interpersonal capital and homosocial networks are in line with feminist research on how informal institutions influence political party decision-making on candidate recruitment (Chappell & Mackay, 2017).

There are a few instances from the research where female intermediaries used their own positional power to organize their community to act on public issues. For example, the research followed female intermediaries in Mualadzi in Mozambique who were members of a neighbourhood group or were community organization leaders and used their positions to highlight agendas raised by the local community. In one such instance, a female intermediary in Mualadzi who was a member of the Mualadzi Management Committee (MMC) successfully used her community leadership position to organize action by women drawing the attention of a mining company and local authorities to the lack of access to clean water. was. Local citizens, particularly women, had long been demanding access to clean water. The women's concerns were driven by the need for clean water to carry out domestic chores. After several petitions and reminders, the MMC members, particularly the women, opted to take protest action. The female intermediary organized the women, and they decided to block the only bridge connecting the neighbourhood, forcing the government and mining company agents to walk on side roads. Their actions were successful in drawing attention to the issue, although access to clean water remains unresolved. The example reveals that female intermediaries can intervene and create pressure by virtue of holding public office, and through organizing public protests. But it also shows that, while women are able to overcome patriarchal barriers to exercise positional power, these may have limited effect, given the lack of state capacity alongside the lack of interest and compliance by the private sector.

The findings on female intermediaries draw attention to two issues. First, intersectionality influences how women exercise political agency. Female intermediaries use their gender/class positions, and kinship/clan networks to promote their agenda. This requires further investigation as the role of intersectionality and women's engagement in local politics in fragile settings is underexplored (Chenoweth, 2019). Second, in mainstream gender and politics literature, the role of the family and proxy representation are viewed negatively (Charrad, 2009; Tadros, 2014). Some scholars have argued that this is a Western liberal bias against familial connections as pathways to politics that undermines one of the few socially sanctioned pathways to political power available to women in these contexts (Nazneen et al., 2014). The role of the family in furthering women's presence in politics requires a nuanced analysis, given that most women begin with limited social capital as interaction between women and non-related men is limited by strict sexual and social codes. In these contexts, male relatives are important conduits for accessing information and other resources from male-only spaces.

5 | COLLECTIVE AGENCY: WOMEN AS ACTIVISTS AND PROTEST LEADERS

So far, the discussion has focused on individual agency. I now turn to investigating women's collective agency. Despite the high barriers to political participation, women's participation in mass protests and social movements in difficult settings is not a new phenomenon. The WPS literature details women's involvement in peace, socio-environmental, faith-based, youth, ethnicity, and natural resource movements in contexts with ongoing conflict or fragility (Cockburn, 2001; Codur & King, 2015; Earle, 2011; Tripp, 2015). A4EA research on women-led protests and mass actions where women participated in larger numbers reveals that women organize as frontline workers of protests and campaigns, develop creative strategies for gaining attention from public authorities at national and local levels, and, in some cases, emerge as leaders (Atela et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Tadros & Edwards, 2020).

5.1 | Gendered expressions of protest repertoires and use of creative tactics

A4EA research on women-led protests or mass protests where women participated in larger numbers found that women's "repertoires of contention" (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) include gender-specific expressions that extend their social role as caregivers to the public realm. This is a not a new finding. As noted above, WPS literature documents collective action by women in conflict-affected settings that highlights their social role. Peace movements in Liberia, Sri Lanka, Sierra Leone (de Alwis, 1997; Ray, 2018; Tripp, 2015), and anti-authoritarian movements in Argentina, Chile, Egypt (Baldez, 2002; Carreon & Moghadam, 2015; Tadros, 2014) show that women use notions of motherhood to claim space and make demands. One such example from A4EA work is by Khan et al. (2021) whose work on Pakistan analysed the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), an ethnic-based youth-led movement in the conflict-affected KP region demanding state accountability; and the Hazara (an ethnic minority group in Balochistan province) women's protests against state violence. Their analysis reveals that women used their role as mothers, sisters, and daughters to demand answers for missing relatives. This framing around motherhood allowed the Hazara women protestors and PTM activists to successfully navigate social norms that constrain women's public presence in these conservative communities. It also reduced the risk of overt repression by the security agencies as the women mobilized in the name of family welfare and made it harder for state security agencies to act against grieving mothers, sisters, and grandmothers.

"Political motherhood" (de Alwis, 1997; Werbner, 1999) is a useful strategy as it allows women to engage in localized public protests to "disrupt their gendered and political habitus and call for the state to perform its duties to protect and provide for its citizens" (Khan & Taela, 2021, p. 1). It can, however, be a double-edged sword. In fact, Domingo et al. (2015, p. 37) point out that, "women's roles as wives and mothers, while providing a focal point for both formal and informal collective action, are often the largest impediment to their participation."

My analysis of A4EA research shows that women's protests acts are distinctively gendered. Women act out the traditional roles assigned to them by society and deploy traditional notions of femininity and masculinity to shame the public authorities. For example, women leading the Chiango protests in Maputo, Mozambique, demanding better road safety lay on the ground assuming the position of giving birth and cried to draw attention to the pain of motherhood, which legitimized their claim to demand child safety (Khan & Taela, 2021). In Pakistan, the Hazara women used traditional notions of masculinity and femininity to shame public (male) authority for failing to protect women. For example, after a bomb attack in 2012, about 100 women members of the Hazara Democratic Party assembled in front of the provincial legislative assembly building and threw their bangles at the gate (Khan et al., 2021). Throwing bangles is a traditional gesture of shaming that implies that the male assembly members are impotent and should stay at home (as only women wear bangles). While these protest acts are creative, they may reinforce "normative femininity" (Parashar, 2010), i.e. actions/performances that are acceptable and ideal only for "females" and strengthen traditional gender norms.

In fact, women contend with several normative regulations pertaining to their bodies when they decide to lead or take part in public protest. These norms pertain to the spaces to which women should have access—as male spaces

are out of bounds—and women's sexuality, as there is risk of exposure of women's bodies and sexual violence that would tarnish family honour. When claiming leadership roles, women must navigate notions that stress women's primary role as carers and perceptions that women's interests are represented by men, and that they lack leadership qualities.

The pressure to conform to gender norms leads women to develop "tactical innovations" (Codur & King, 2015). Findings show that in Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan women develop protest tactics to circumvent the ways bodies are regulated and use their bodies as a central part of "protest performance" (Butler, 2015) in a non-violent way. For example, the Pakistan Lady Health Workers demanding decent work conditions used sit-ins to block major roads to repudiate the norms that restrict women's presence in public space (Khan et al., 2021). Female students in Egypt used songs, dance, and poetry to break the taboo on publicly discussing the female body and sexual harassment (Hamada et al., 2020). The #BBOG organizers in Nigeria performed daily sit-ins in front of the Unity Fountain in Abuja (Aina et al., 2019), to remind the public about the physical absence of the kidnapped Chibok girls.

The centrality of women's bodies in these protests reveals how women are perceived by public authorities as political subjects and citizens. Apart from using the body to occupy public space and "perform protests" (Butler, 2015) in a creative non-violent way, women protestors also contest how female bodies are perceived. For example, the Aurat March, a feminist collective that organizes annual International Women's Day rallies to protest misogyny in Pakistan, coined the slogan, *meri jism, meri marzi* (my body, my choice) to directly challenge controls over women's sexual and reproductive autonomy. Egyptian students protesting sexual harassment framed female bodies in a manner that shifted the discussion from viewing women as passive victims of violence to agents who possess sexual autonomy to say no. These frames also draw attention to the state's duty to guarantee personal freedom that women lack.

Finally, in the research, the online space emerged as an arena for women to build counter-publics (Fraser, 1990) and mould discourses on women's concerns. While social media platforms provide an opportunity to voice claims and bypass male control over public discourse, they also contain gendered risks. For example, the #BBOG movement strategically decided to use social media as a campaign tool to bypass the control placed on traditional media by male elites (Atela et al., 2021). But visibility in social media poses significant personal risks for women activists. Research on women-led protests in Pakistan (particularly those involved in the Aurat March, PTM, and Hazara protests) and anti-sexual harassment protestors in Egypt revealed that female activists faced extensive online abuse, including verbal abuse, threats of sexual violence, and threats towards family members (Hamada et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021). This is not a unique phenomenon, but it is gender-specific as women experience a higher level of sexual and gender-specific threats online than men (Srinivasan, 2021). Visibility on social media also leads to increased state surveillance.

5.2 | What enables women's collective voice and agency?

Analysis of A4EA research reveals that in difficult settings certain conditions trigger and sustain women's collective agency. I focus here on conditions that lead women to act collectively, factors that lower male resistance to women's participation in protests and reduce the possibility of repression by the state, and strategies that make women-led protests effective.

5.2.1 | When do women act and what lowers male resistance and risks of repression?

While women-led protests are often triggered by certain events, they are the result of repeated failures by public authorities to protect women and their rights. Analysis of women-led protests in Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan reveals that they started with a single trigger event that spun off into a series of protest events and consolidated into a movement. This, of course, indicates that there was a series of "coordinating efforts on behalf of shared

interests or programs" among the protestors (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 7). For example, the anti-sexual harassment protests in Egypt were triggered by a specific incident caught on camera on the campus of Alexandria University, which shocked the public (Hamada et al., 2020); Boko Haram's kidnapping of 276 Chibok girls triggered the #BBOG campaign (Aina et al., 2019); and it was after a series of bombings of Hazara men that the women decided to protest, despite men forbidding it, to protect their menfolk (Khan et al., 2021). However, these trigger events do not take place in a vacuum (Tadros & Edwards, 2020). Women protestors see themselves as actors deserving answers from public authorities for their repeated failures and are operating in contexts where protests and disruption may be the only way of "being heard" (Gaventa, 2023).

Two factors help bypass male gatekeeping and lower the degree of resistance women face from their community for organizing protest activities. These are: (1) if women are seen to protest as carers on issues that are about protecting men and the community's interest; and (2) when public space for men has shrunk because the risk of violence against them is high. Constrained political conditions create an opening for mobilizing by women and mobilizing around women's issues as ways to contend the legitimacy of the state and other public authorities (Waylen, 2015).

Analysis of A4EA evidence suggests that the framing of demands is critical for lowering the risk of state repression and for legitimizing claims. When women protestors can establish how they are directly affected by a lack of services and insecurity and demonstrate why public authorities are obliged to address these gaps to enable women to play their traditional caring roles, pressure is created on the public authorities. In a similar vein to the Chiango women example, the Hazara women framed their demands that the state is duty-bound to ensure the safety of them and their men. The women linked men's safety to their familial roles as mothers, wives, and daughters who require male protection and support. In contrast, the anti-sexual harassment protestors at Egyptian universities and the Aurat March protestors in Pakistan framed their demands to show how the state was obligated to protect women's rights as individual, autonomous actors and political subjects. However, this framing did not always generate positive responses from various public authorities.

The nature of claims also influences how state security agencies perceive threats. Road safety, access to better services, or protection demands are not perceived as subversive. These kinds of demands do not directly challenge the state's power, particularly the military or state security authority. This, coupled with the use of non-violent tactics, such as the use of art and performance by the Egyptian students or peaceful sit-ins, are perceived to be non-threatening by the state security agencies.

5.2.2 | What strategies garner support for women-led protests?

Working horizontally with multiple actors and constituencies ensure that women-led protests gain legitimacy and are sustained over time. Analysis of the women-led protests in Pakistan and Egypt reveals that women protestors in civil resistance campaigns work horizontally, reaching out to multiple actors in order to create a wide support base (Hamada et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021). These findings align broadly with findings from feminist movement literature on constituency-building (Beckwith, 2013; Molyneux, 2001; Nazneen & Okech, 2021). The interpersonal capital of women leaders mitigates risks and sustains protests. Khan and Taela (2021, p. 8) point out that women protest leaders in Pakistan and Mozambique engage with "multiple allies, including religious and ethnic associations, political organizations and feminist groups, to mitigate the considerable risks caused by their disruption." Women protest leaders work horizontally with civil society actors and support other protest movements, expressing solidarity both online and offline. For example, the Aurat March organizers helped to organize PTM protests, while the Hazara women participated in sit-ins organized by PTM. The Aurat Foundation, a civil society organization (CSO), helped arrange for a coffin and shrouds for the Hazara women who were blocking roads, to amplify the message that they were refusing to bury their dead. The #BBOG movement secured support from both international civil society actors and national rights-based organizations (Aina et al., 2019; Atela et al., 2021).

The process of working horizontally is not, however, without tensions. For example, the Lady Health Workers and Hazara women protestors were uneasy about explicit slogans used by the Aurat March organizers regarding female

bodily autonomy. In part this discomfort arose from the fact that association with these explicit slogans would place them in jeopardy in their own communities (Khan et al., 2020). These tensions are navigated by protest leaders, which is where interpersonal networks are effective.

While the protestors in the studies engaged extensively with civil society actors, they were wary of political parties. In Pakistan, engagement with the Hazara Democratic Party allowed the Hazara women to legitimize their cause within their conservative community, but they were constrained by the party as to what they could do or say. In all the case studies, a closer engagement with political parties carried the risk of loss of legitimacy and state repression. The #BBOG movement in Nigeria was careful not to be associated with any political parties in order not be connected to security agencies or the regime in power (Atela et al., 2021). The campaign leaders made it unofficial policy for members not to refer to their political affiliation when they were participating in sit-ins or making public statements (Atela et al., 2021).

While wary of close affiliations with political parties, women protest leaders are willing to use their connections with female representatives in power, especially those with feminist credentials on particular agendas. This aligns with what is established in gender and politics literature, that connections between autonomous feminist actors and women representatives are crucial for accessing formal policy space on women's rights concerns (Htun & Weldon, 2018).

6 | WOMEN'S POLITICAL AGENCY: IMPACT ON EMPOWERMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

So far, I have analysed A4EA research findings on a range of women's expressions of political agency. Now I move on to explore the kind of responses women were able to secure. I also examine how expressions of individual and collective political agency influence women's empowerment and accountability relations with public authorities.

A4EA research on the gender voting gap in urban areas in Pakistan and Nigeria shows that women were not able to use their votes to strategically influence political parties and when they try to do so they face significant barriers. In fact, political parties in Pakistan invested less intensely on targeting women voters in urban areas than in rural areas. In the latter, women are mobilized by clan leaders as voting blocs to bolster support for political parties. This mobilization brings women to the attention of the political parties (Cheema et al., 2019).

These findings draw attention to the accountability gap that exists between elected representatives and female citizens in urban areas. Women's lack of engagement is not a straightforward individual "choice." Addressing this gender gap in voting involves holding to account bodies such as the election commission and local authorities at the community level, and active interventions to shift how male gatekeepers and political parties engage with women. However, donor interventions and public policy rarely focus on creating and holding public authorities to account for "gendered failure" (Goetz & Hassim, 2003).

A4EA findings also show that in difficult settings despite gendered barriers women do make claims on public authorities and navigate access to services and protection through male intermediaries. Male mediation of women's access has an adverse impact on public authorities' seeing women as a constituency and feeling responsible to meet their demands. While female intermediaries themselves may experience a sense of empowerment at the personal level, the findings show their status as legitimate political actors remains limited. Though several of the female intermediaries reported feeling an obligation to respond to local women's claims, this does not flow through to gender-biased public authorities.

Given that individual expressions of political agency have limited impact on women's political empowerment at a collective level, a critical area of concern is whether women-led protests and women's participation in mass protests in these settings lead to women's empowerment in the long term. Existing literature on women's participation in civil resistance and peace processes argues that women's active involvement increases the possibility of success (Chenoweth, 2019) and contains the possibility of norm change (Tripp, 2015). What do the A4EA cases reveal?

In all the A4EA cases the participants reported a sense of increased critical awareness (power within) and a collective sense of belonging and ability to act together (power with) (Rowlands, 1997). For example, the Chiango activists reported an awareness of how their rights are connected to other forms of relationships beyond their neighbourhood power structures (Khan & Taela, 2021). The women protestors learned to navigate and challenge male gatekeepers and sticky social norms and minimize the risk of repression from state security agencies to claim their rights (Khan & Taela, 2021). This critical consciousness contributes towards increased agency as women protestors' skills and capacities for public engagement and a sense of collective identity develop.

The Chiango protests, the women-led protests against state violence and misogyny in Pakistan, and the anti-sexual harassment protests in Egypt, brought local issues into the public domain and gained recognition from public authorities. In some instances, protests have led to concrete action. For example, in Egypt university authorities formed committees and formulated policies to address sexual harassment on campus (Hamada et al., 2020); and in Chiango, the President of Mozambique came and met the family who lost their child and promised that infrastructure would be built to prevent traffic accidents (Khan & Taela, 2021). The #BBOG campaign has led to several practical responses from the Nigerian government, including the creation of a missing persons register, and arguably, #BBOG's actions created pressure on the government to negotiate for the release of some of the Chibok abductees (Atela et al., 2021). These successes definitely emboldened women activists and for some participation in these movements may be a stepping-stone for entering formal politics (Khan et al., 2021). While participation in protests may serve as a pathway to political leadership in formal spaces, the question remains whether changes in awareness and a sense of empowerment at the individual level lead to a change in relationship with powerholders?

A4EA research shows that, in many instances women as a group were successful in securing a "response" from military or local authorities. But these "successes" are limited to specific events and are fleeting. The impact of women-led protests on empowerment and accountability is not linear as there is no "automatic link between women's presence and voice in public life and transformative change" (Domingo et al., 2015, p. 85). The responses secured by women on specific issues in a specific location or time did not trigger larger systemic or policy change. A larger dataset and comparative research are needed to systematically explore whether these instances of "success" lead to the beginnings of women's public engagement, and to a sense of obligation from public authorities, leading ultimately to a shift in the social contract between women and public authorities. However, public authorities are not the sole custodians of the social contract. Different actors shape the social contract over periods of time, and explicit political content about the rules of governance is only a small part of it. A change in the social contract requires a change in women's position and interaction with their household members and their community. And yet, in difficult settings, the social contract itself can comprise multiple social contracts with different groups and be ambiguous and incomplete—only evident in its breach.

7 | CONCLUSION

The findings presented above from A4EA research refine our understanding of the range of expressions of political agency that women exercise. The findings show that—despite fear of repression, sticky social norms, and male gatekeeping—women can and do exercise political agency in difficult settings. As individuals, women engage in voting and act as intermediaries to broker deals for men and women. However, male mediation of women's access to public forums limits their ability to engage with public authorities directly and to protect their interests. These sticky norms are further reinforced by local state agencies and political party gatekeepers. The fact that sticky norms endure despite women's participation in public protests implies that norms may become impediments to social cohesion in these contexts.

It is also important to note that, despite the relative invisibility of women in formal politics and community decision-making forums in the places we studied, women do exert collective agency and mobilize to protest failures of public authorities to ensure protection and services. These women-led protests demonstrate that women can

experience governance failures differently from men (Cornwall, 2017). These expressions of collective agency are largely gendered, where women frame demands highlighting their role as carers and bearers of traditions to minimize risks of backlash. But in many cases this extension of the private role does not challenge restrictive community norms regarding gender roles in the long run.

Mobilizing to make claims in the public sphere incurs gender-specific risks for women protestors, such as online abuse and backlash from their own communities. There is evidence that different women-led protests can galvanize each other and use performative protest strategies to claim space. The A4EA analysis of women-led protests also reveals that activists use multiple strategies to demand accountability, street protests being just one.

A4EA research also reveals that class, ethnic, and other identities intersect with women's sex/gender position to influence their ability to exercise agency. While the sample is small, in all A4EA research settings the women intermediaries or protest leaders who engaged with formal political institutions or who progressed to holding leadership positions in mass protests were from local elite or well-off families or were from educated middle-class homes and had access to social and or political capital.

The analysis also shows that, while protestors developed a critical consciousness and felt emboldened by the responses they elicited from public authorities, it remains to be seen whether these incidents lead to public authority recognition of a formal obligation.

What do the findings mean for researchers, women's rights activists, policy-makers, and donors working in difficult settings? First, there is a clear need for a more nuanced understanding of how intersecting inequalities (particularly religious and ethnic identities) interact with gender in these places and limit or enhance women's political agency. Unpacking political intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) is important. Systematic data on how intersectionality affects women's political agency is not robust in the A4EA research or other existing bodies of research (Chenoweth, 2019). Addressing this gap would further our understanding of the links between sex/gender identity, political agency, and empowerment.

Second, there is strong evidence around how sticky social norms enforced by gatekeepers within the household and the community restrict women's political engagement (Cheema et al., 2022). These norms are also reinforced by gatekeepers in formal power structures: local state authorities, political parties, and clan leadership. Breaking this perverse loop requires active intervention to tackle male gatekeepers in formal government structures and within the community. But many of the interventions for building women's political leadership focus only on women and do not build a support base for women's leadership among the community or create space for women to engage directly with multiple public authorities. Focus on shifting social norms and working with male gatekeepers needs to be a part of policy interventions.

Third, at times the women's rights agenda may be in contention with the security agenda in places with ongoing conflict. As the degree of state repression increases, with various kinds of media control and repressive laws being passed, there is a need to explore the gendered impact of these measures, particularly how women's rights organizations navigate these restrictions, and whether increased state control and democratic backslide close pathways for women's leadership or galvanize women.

Given this context, the pathways to supporting women's leadership in difficult settings will vary. Female activists are required to work on multiple fronts to be effective—simultaneously calling on the state and other powerful actors to respond to secure women's rights, while minimizing threats from security agencies to individual women activists. Minimizing risks includes a range of tactics: drawing media attention to specific issues and protests, using social media creatively, and filing court petitions for protection orders. Protection may require keeping informal channels open to interact with the state security apparatus, which carries its own risks as close connection with security agencies may threaten the legitimacy of the activists. A key area of work for women's rights groups is to frame counter-narratives on women's empowerment and gender equality, and to reach popular and cultural spaces. These spaces and gender-equality narratives are at times "captured" and instrumentally used by authoritarian leaders and populist forces for anti-gender backlash (Lewin, 2021). Keeping the space open for deliberation remains a key challenge for activists and protestors working on gender equality.

Fourth, donors supporting women's political agency and rights in such settings need to go beyond funding programmes on pre-set goals, and instead focus on the design of interventions that consider agendas set by local women and national-level organizations, look for opportunities at the subnational level where there may be more spaces for change, and be alert to attempts to divide progressive gender goals through identity politics. However, bilateral and multilateral donor action is constrained by its own internal processes and ways of working that may limit the possibilities of supporting smaller local women's groups. This may be because local CSOs cannot always meet funding requirements. Donors are required to follow the principle of "neutrality" in places with ongoing conflicts, which may lead to the exclusion of specific rights-based groups. Moreover, donors tend to prioritize working with bureaucracies to minimize transaction costs. The rise of nationalist and autocratic tendencies also means that donors are unable to fund certain kinds of civil society empowerment programmes as these may be deemed subversive. All these factors limit the space for deliberations with local women's groups and the space for plurality, which is needed for building contextualized, bottom-up interventions that tackle sticky gender norms and create effective pro-gender-equality networks.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable as no new data was analysed in the study. Most of the A4EA sources used are published and available in public domain. The reference list has the weblinks for the publications for these cases.

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