institute of
development
studies

# Women's Leadership and Political Agency in Fragile Polities

Sohela Nazneen

June 2022

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) delivers world-class research, learning and teaching that transforms the knowledge, action and leadership needed for more equitable and sustainable development globally.

Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) is an international research programme which explores how social and political action can contribute to empowerment and accountability in fragile, conflict, and violent settings, with a particular focus on Egypt, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan.

Led by the Institute of Development Studies, A4EA is being implemented by a consortium which includes: the Accountability Research Center, the Collective for Social Science Research, the Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives, Itad, Oxfam GB, and the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research.

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

# Women's Leadership and Political Agency in Fragile Polities

**Sohela Nazneen**
**June 2022**

# Women's Leadership and Political Agency in Fragile Polities

**Sohela Nazneen**
**June 2022**

## Summary

Recent evidence from Afghanistan shows that even in the most difficult contexts, women will still protest for their rights. This paper draws on evidence from the Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) research programme to show how women express their political agency and activism and seek accountability in repressive contexts. A4EA research looked at cases of women-led protest in Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan, and explored women's political participation in Nigeria and Pakistan. The research shows that despite some success in claim-making on specific issues, 'sticky norms' and male gatekeeping prevail and govern women's access to public space and mediate their voice in these contexts. The paper concludes by calling on donors to go beyond blueprints in programming, and to work in agile and creative ways to support women's rights organising.

## Keywords

Women's political participation; women-led protests; Egypt; Mozambique; Nigeria; Pakistan; male gatekeeping; restrictive social norms; fragile polities.

## Author

**Sohela Nazneen** is a Research Fellow based in the Governance Cluster at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, and leads IDS' work in gender and politics. She is a political economist and works on women's empowerment, feminist movements, and backlash against women's rights in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Her recent publications include a guest edited special issue of the *Gender and Development* journal (29.2–3) on feminist protests and politics in a world of crisis.

# Executive summary

In fragile polities, women's political agency is limited in multiple ways by gendered social norms about mobility and access to public spaces, the threat of violence, and biased perceptions of state agents and decision makers who do not consider women to be legitimate claim-makers. Despite these gender-specific barriers, some women do exercise political agency. They vote, and lead and participate in protests to contest powerholders and unjust regimes. Women also engage with public authorities to demand better services and protection. This paper explores the following questions:

– How do sticky social norms and other structural barriers limit women's expressions of political agency in fragile polities?

– In what ways are the expressions of women's individual and collective agency gendered and what is their impact on women's leadership and empowerment?

– Are women able to secure responses from public authorities? And do these instances lead to a change in the relationship between women and powerholders?

I synthesise findings from Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) research projects undertaken in Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan on women's political agency which used a range of methods including large N surveys, telephone surveys, ethnographic methods, document analysis, and comparative case studies. The findings show that women's political agency – voting, running as a candidate, participating in or leading public protests, and acting as intermediaries to resolve governance problems – is mediated by sticky social norms. These norms are enforced by male gatekeepers at the family and community levels, who limit women's engagement in formal politics and how they access services at the local level. Women's expressions of collective agency are gendered in the way claims are justified or in the way women mobilise to reduce risks of backlash from community and security agencies. These expressions include framing demands as mothers and protesting in ways that conform to community gender norms. While collective organising by women does lead to women feeling empowered at the personal level, its impact on the collective position of women as citizens/claim-makers or on women's leadership and ability to secure accountability outcomes is uneven. A key issue here is whether these instances of collective agency create a legacy of women being recognised as claim-makers by public authorities and shift how public authorities view their obligations towards women.

# Contents

## Boxes

## Tables

# Acknowledgements

# Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| A4EA | Action for Empowerment and Accountability |
| BBOG | Bring Back Our Girls |
| FCVAS | fragile, conflict, and violence-affected settings |
| KP | Khyber Pakhtunkhwa |
| PTM | Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement |
| WiRe | Women in Resistance |
| WPS | Women, peace and security |

# 1.  Introduction

When the Taliban reclaimed Kabul in August 2021, there was fear among ordinary Afghan women that the change in political power would translate into a curbing of women's rights, particularly with respect to access to education, jobs, public space, and roles in political leadership. However, what was distinctively different this time from the Taliban takeover in 1991, was the wide coverage that women's rights received in the international media and the active presence of Afghan women in the social and print media voicing opposition to the Taliban position on women's rights. The ongoing demonstrations in Kabul led by women demanding the Taliban leaders account for their position on women's rights is inspiring, but at the same time entails grave risks for the protestors. The demonstrations have provoked beatings from Taliban lower-ranking members – who were later arrested for their behaviour. The women were admonished that this was 'not the time to protest' – but their claims are yet to be addressed by the Taliban leadership (*The Guardian* 2021).

Incidents like these show that even in the most difficult settings of fragility – where the law-and-order situation is volatile, and where one is dealing with an extremist, and explicitly and exceptionally misogynist, armed group – if the opportunity presents itself women will still protest attacks against their rights. In fact, the women, peace and security (WPS) literature shows that women in some of the most fragile and unstable contexts still exercise political agency through participation in local and national-level protests, demanding protection, security, and peace (Chenoweth 2019; Couder and King 2015; Tripp 2015). Recent longitudinal data sets developed on women in non-violent resistance (WiRe) movements against oppressive regimes (including in settings with active conflict), show a strong correlation between women's participation at the frontline and a commitment to non-violence in protest actions. Further analysis shows that having a higher participation of women in resistance movements has a significant correlation with a successful resistance campaign (Chenoweth 2019). Existing literature shows that though formal politics in fragile polities remains dominated by men and male leaders, women **do** undertake activities to collectively organise at the frontline, develop strategies for gaining attention from powerholders at national and local levels and, in some cases, emerge as key leaders of the resistance against oppression.

How do women exercise political agency in fragile polities? Research conducted by the **Action for Empowerment and Accountability** (A4EA) programme reveals that women express their political agency through a range of decisions and actions at the individual and collective levels. These actions can take the form of individual voting; making claims on local authorities (both state and non-state) for better services; demanding information on missing relatives; or

participating in protests against violence perpetrated against their community. Women also take part as elected representatives or civil society organisation leaders in formal processes of decision-making to push public authorities to account for their actions.

Existing literature in the WPS field shows that social norms around mobility and access to the public sphere; high levels of violence; and the 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. Active conflict in fragile polities leads to 'an overweighting of security and intelligence forces that are traditionally dominated by men' (Carothers 2016: 8), and high levels of violence directed at women that discourages their political participation.

The effect of these barriers is confirmed in the polities A4EA researched (Cheema *et al.* 2021; Oladapo *et al.* 2021). But A4EA findings also show that women can and do navigate restrictive social norms and biased formal rules, and organise using gender-specific tactics that reduce the risk of direct targeting by state security agencies and other non-state actors (Atela *et al.* 2021; Khan and Taela 2021; Khan *et al.* 2021; Tadros and Khan 2018). These gender-specific expressions of collective agency influence the development of women's leadership skills and their capacities to exert political power collectively. These findings, then, raise the questions: How do sticky social norms and other structural barriers limit women's expressions of political agency in fragile polities? In what ways are the expressions of women's individual and collective agency gendered, and how do these acts influence women's leadership development and empowerment? Are women able to secure responses from public authorities and do these responses lead to a change in the relationship between women and powerholders?

In this paper, I synthesise key findings with respect to women's political agency and leadership drawn from A4EA research. The A4EA programme was implemented in two phases, with a total of 20 projects in five countries – Egypt, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Not all the projects explored women's leadership and collective agency, however. The empirical findings presented here are largely from studies conducted in Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan that explored: (a) women-led protests or movements on gender equality at the local/subnational or national levels; (b) protests or movements that witnessed significant participation by women at local/subnational/national levels; and (c) research that explicitly explored barriers to women's ability to participate in public domains in fragile polities.

The main claims the paper makes based on an analysis of A4EA work on women's political agency are the following. First, women must mediate sticky social norms that are enforced by (mostly male) gatekeepers at the family and

community levels to participate in formal politics (e.g. voting/participating in political meetings) and protest politics in fragile polities. Women face gender-specific consequences for violating these sticky social norms in the form of verbal abuse, physical and online threats of sexual violence, public shaming, and other forms of sanctions from the community and from state security forces. Second, women tend to be relatively invisible in formal politics at the local and national levels in fragile polities. However, women-led protests (localised or national) tend to draw attention from various actors: the media, security agencies, non-state actors, and the public. Women's protest activities tend to deploy 'repertoires of contention' that are gender specific, for instance they often draw attention to their social roles as family and community carers, to make claims on the public space. This kind of framing reduces the risk of backlash from men in the community.

Third, women-led protests and women's participation in community-led protests create possibilities for women to develop a sense of collective identity. These identities vary depending on the context, and group members can be conservative (i.e. protest mainly as political mothers), or can mobilise as feminists. Fourth, women protest leaders develop networks and political capital to emerge as leaders in formal politics. However, this is not a linear pathway. Whether women protest leaders can further their political involvement is determined by the threat of backlash from the community, interpersonal capital, and the openness of the civic space. In fact, women protest leaders and activists often report that participation in protest politics has led to an increased sense of awareness about rights, sense of belonging to a collective, and ability to act together. Fifth, these transformational changes at the personal level do not always translate into women as a group being able to secure accountability outcomes from public authorities for women's rights and gender equality. Not all the collective protests examined in the A4EA research were about gender equality. In the cases where there was a clear demand for gender responsiveness, while women, in some instances, were able to secure visibility for their claims, and a positive response from the public authorities to these claims, the success was often fleeting. Whether women-led protests and women's involvement in other protests create a legacy for women as claimants and a shift in the social contract, i.e. recognition of an obligation to women and a change in discourse, remains to be seen.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 defines the concepts and details the context- and gender-specific barriers faced by women in exercising political agency in fragile polities. Section 3 explores the ways women express political agency and how these are gendered. Section 4 explores the impact, i.e. the kinds of responses secured by women, and whether the forms of political agency studied here lead to women's empowerment and a shift in women's relationship with public authorities. Section 5 reflects on the findings and identifies research gaps and ways policymakers can engage further on this issue.

# 2. Fragile polities and gender-specific barriers

A4EA researchers use the term 'fragile, conflict, and violence-affected settings' (FCVAS) to describe the contexts being researched. The term is meant to highlight the 'specific characteristics of a defined area or affected group at a point in time' rather than a country or a state as a whole (Gaventa and Oswald 2019: 6). While each of these terms (fragile, conflict, violence) refer to different states of being and are not to be used interchangeably, these do at times converge in a particular setting. As such, fragility is understood to be along a continuum and classified as being experienced in many settings, including within stable states. As Osaghae (2010) states, fragility specifically includes one or more of the following elements: (a) weak, ineffective, and unstable political institutions; (b) inability to exercise jurisdiction over its geographical area; (c) crisis of legitimacy that takes the forms of contested citizenship, violent contestation for state power, perennial challenges to the validity and viability of the state, separatist agitation, civil war; (d) unstable and divided population that encourages exit from, rather than loyalty to, the state; and (e) pervasive corruption, poverty that leads to low levels of economic growth and development. This understanding, although discussed under the moniker of 'fragile states', lends itself to understanding fragility as a setting rather than a state or country. Additionally, it creates a continuum in which fragile settings are not under just one classification, but rather understood as a diverse set of characteristics which can converge and diverge at different moments and locations.

While the above definition does not include any gender-specific elements of fragility, each of the five characteristics identified by Osaghae (2010) have gendered impacts. An initial A4EA review by Cornwall (2017) draws attention to the fact that contexts of fragility exist within different political conjunctures, raising questions of governance that are more political than merely institutional in nature. In fact, taking a gender perspective on fragility involves recognising that fragile contexts can exist for some people within states which are not seen as fragile by the state or global community (Chowbey 2016). A gender lens calls into question the adequacy of understandings of fragile contexts which focus only on state capacity to have a monopoly over violence and provision of services, and on people's ability to access services provided by the state. The inclusion of gender expands the analysis of fragility. Gender brings attention to the ability of the state to meet women's rights to protection against domestic violence (Cornwall 2017), and other forms of violence that exist in the public realm (e.g. sexual harassment, Tangi 2020). Inclusion of a gender lens also

draws attention to the interpersonal nature of violence. For example, Green's (2017) definition of conflict as relational between two or more parties who have incompatible goals opens up space for exploring insecurity experienced by women within the household and at the community level in otherwise stable political contexts, and draws attention to the domestic safety of women as a viable indicator of FCVAS.

A gender lens highlights the link between private and public spheres, the role of community and household-level actors that enforce gender-biased norms and increase vulnerability experienced by women. It also draws attention to the 'sexual contract' and how access to public authorities is mediated by (male) actors for women. In addition, a gender analysis of fragility requires going beyond the macro level (national, subnational) to focus also on the micro (household) and meso (community) levels, as gendered vulnerability is differently experienced than other forms of vulnerability (race, class, etc). The public–private chimera is useful in fragile contexts because so many of the interactions between citizens and the state are in reality governed by informal non-public arrangements and institutions. The link between women and the state in fragile settings is already very tenuous. As male authority mediates women's link to both formal and informal authorities in fragile polities, it further weakens women's tenuous link with the public authorities.

Taking the above analysis into account, in this paper I use the term fragile polities to describe the contexts within which A4EA research was conducted. Joshi (n.d.) argues that using this term allows us to move beyond a state-centric focus of fragility and of state failure to provide service and protection. It highlights the range of non-state actors that exert public authority in fragile contexts (including male authority at the household and community level over women), and the variations of fragility that exist within a geographical territory.

As stated earlier, the A4EA research explored expressions of women's political agency in Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan. All these polities have been under military rule and have legacies of violent conflict (civil war and/or ethnic tensions and other forms of division within the population). These polities have high levels of political violence and surveillance by the state. In recent years the democratic norms and institutions have weakened in these countries with space for dissent shrinking (Anderson *et al*. 2021). However, there are variations between them in the degree to which political freedoms have eroded.

Given this context, women's participation in politics is limited in multiple ways. Women's ability to exercise political agency is shaped by the individual circumstances and structural constraints that distribute power and privilege to men and women differently. The constitutions of these polities guarantee equal participation of women as voters, candidates, and officeholders, but women's presence in elected office is limited. The percentage of women holding political

office in local and provincial government varies in these polities based on whether quotas exist or not. The percentage of women in the lower house of parliament are: Egypt (27); Mozambique (42); Nigeria (13); Pakistan (20) (IPU 2021). The mainstream political parties remain male-dominated spaces, with the existence of religious political parties in Egypt and Pakistan that advocate for a limited leadership role of women (Tadros and Khan 2018). Generally, women are not perceived as viable political leaders or candidates by the parties in these polities (Cheema *et al*. 2019; Oladopo *et al*. 2021).

It should be noted that in Egypt, Pakistan, and parts of Northern Nigeria, Sharia Law defines women's personal rights (in marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc). The existence of religious personal laws and customary laws means women do not enjoy equal rights in the private sphere and, in some cases, there are limits on their legal personhood and property rights. Socially, the right to seek redress for violence committed by husbands or family members remains limited. These limits reinforce restrictive social norms on women's ability to exercise agency within the household and the community. In fact, an A4EA survey conducted on intrahousehold decision-making in urban centres in Pakistan (Lahore) and Nigeria (Lagos) shows women have limited agency compared to men when it comes to making decisions on whether to take the Covid-19 vaccine. Of the 3,000 men and women surveyed in Lahore, only 7 per cent of the women said they could decide on their own whether to take the vaccine, compared to 73 per cent of the men (Cheema, Khan and Khan Mohmand 2021). In Lagos, about 68 per cent of the women said they could decide on their own, but still compared to men this was low: about 83 per cent of the men were able to decide for themselves (PASGR 2022). The survey reveals a stark gender difference in decision-making power. How does this lack of decision-making power at the intrahousehold level affect individual women's participation in politics?

A4EA research on the gender gap in voting in Pakistan reveals how sticky norms and a lack of decision-making power affects women's voting behaviour (Cheema *et al*. 2019). The findings on the gender voting gap are not specific to fragile polities, but they do highlight how social norms adversely affect individual political agency in terms of voting in the contexts explored in A4EA work. Restrictive social norms around female mobility and presence in public come from ideas that women should not interact with non-related males, and that women's bodies and actions need to be controlled to ensure chastity. Notions of family honour are closely connected to women acting modestly in public. Cheema *et al*. (2019) found direct links between men's negative views on women exercising independent political agency, and low electoral turnout. Domestic violence or fear of domestic violence where disagreements exist between women and other family members also reduce participation in voting (Oladapo *et al*. 2021).

High levels of political violence and gender-specific risks significantly inhibit women's participation in politics in fragile polities. The surveys conducted in Lahore and Lagos reveal that women fear violence in political rallies and events and decide to stay away (Cheema *et al.* 2020; Oladapo *et al.* 2021).

The expressions of political agency analysed by A4EA researchers included a range of actions: voting, candidacy, representation, informally acting as brokers between (women) claimants and public authorities for services, and protest activities. Based on an analysis of these actions, I have identified the following three components of individual political agency: (1) critical consciousness about one's interests and wellbeing; (2) ability to use political voice[1] to advocate for one's interests; and (3) action to secure these interests (voting, standing for office, brokering deals, etc). Action to secure one's interests also includes collective forms of agency that require mobilising as a group around a specific group interest to attain (gender) transformative changes (Agarwal 2010).

To explore expressions of political agency in fragile polities with respect to voting, candidacy, and representation I use findings from research on women representatives in formal political institutions and women's voting and interaction with political party gatekeepers in Nigeria and Pakistan (Cheema *et al.* 2021; Oladapo *et al.* 2021). To examine protest activities (and expressions of collective agency) I draw upon cases of contention (either women-led protests or movements/campaigns where women participated in large numbers) in Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan. These protest cases include: campaigns in three university settings (Alexandria, Beni Suef, and Fayoum) demanding accountability with respect to sexual harassment in Egypt (Hamada *et al.* 2020); the Chiango protests led by women demanding road safety and public service delivery in Mozambique (Khan and Taela 2021); and Bring Back Our Girls (#BBOG), a women-led movement in Nigeria that emerged following the abduction of 276 school girls in Chibok by Boko Haram (Atela *et al.* 2021). I also use findings from a range of women-led protests that focus on sexual violence, misogyny, and labour and citizenship rights in Pakistan (Khan *et al.* 2021). These are: protests against sexual violence in Punjab province; the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM), an ethnic-based, youth-led movement in conflict-affected Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP); struggles by lady health workers for decent work conditions; the Hazara (an ethnic minority group) women's collective action against state violence in Balochistan; and the Aurat March (Women's March) initiative organised by young feminists to protest misogyny.

Table 2.1 shows the kinds of research conducted in each case study country.

---

[1]    Voice includes the ability to articulate one's views and opinions (Goetz and Hassim 2003).

# Table 2.1 Range of A4EA studies

| Expressions of political agency | Pakistan | Nigeria | Mozambique | Egypt |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Survey on women's voting in urban areas | X | X | - | - |
| Phone survey on women's agency with respect to health during Covid-19 | X | X | - | - |
| Women intermediaries – as part of diary methods used with poor households over 12 months | X | - | X | - |
| Case studies of women-led protests/collective action using media analysis, key informant interviews, document analysis | X | X | X | X |
| Country case studies on binary framings used by religious forces limiting women's rights work | X | X | - | X |

Source: Author's own

# 3.   Expressions of political agency

Women exercise political agency in multiple ways, but the limits placed on their agency within the household influence how women engage in formal politics and with public authorities.

This section illustrates the range of expressions of political agency explored in this paper.

## 3.1  Women as voters and candidates

A4EA research on voting patterns in Pakistan and Nigeria reveals significant gender gaps. In Pakistan, the gap is surprisingly stark in urban areas – about 8.5 per cent lower than compared to rural areas (Cheema *et al*. 2019; Cheema *et al*. 2021).[2] Similarly, the study conducted in Nigeria[3] reveals significant regional variations in women's voting patterns – with Northern Nigeria lagging behind compared to the South (Oladapo *et al.* 2021). Both studies reveal that the usual predictors of gender gap – care work burden, low labour force participation, lack of control over income – do not fully explain why women in urban areas do not vote. What is innovative about the Pakistan (Lahore) study is that it provides strong evidence on how sticky norms and male gatekeepers at the household level act as barriers in urban settings. Many of the women surveyed pointed out that while the men in their household do not object to women voting, only one third of the women thought they would have permission to attend a community meeting on elections, and only 18 per cent thought they could attend an election rally (Cheema *et al.* 2022).

The findings are in stark contrast to the data for advanced democracies in Europe and North America where women's participation tends to be higher compared to men (Waylen *et al.* 2013). However, the assumption that more women vote compared to men does not universally hold true. Though women have gained voting rights in postcolonial countries since independence, and contestation over women's suffrage was absent at the time of independence, the gender gap in voting is not unusual. Recent literature on South Asia shows that the gender gap in women's electoral participation is acute, though the gender gap in education and fertility has fallen in urban areas (Chandra and Potter 2016; Cheema *et al*. 2022).

These findings from the A4EA study on the gender voting gap, in fact, reveal that men act as mediators between the household and the public sphere and as

---

[2]   The study used a data set produced by the Election Commission of Pakistan for the 2018 elections.

[3]   The study used data from Nigeria's 2015 and 2019 general elections and Afrobarometer's 2018 Nigeria Round 7 survey.

gatekeepers in formal politics. At the household level, men limit women's ability to take autonomous decisions to vote, run as candidates, and attend political meetings. This constraint is placed on women even when they have the material resources and the desire to participate in formal politics. Women's access to shared household resources (money) and to the time needed for engaging in political activities is restricted by men (Cheema *et al.* 2022).

Male gatekeeping also takes place in party politics. The Pakistan study reveals that the gender gap in voting in urban and rural areas is correlated to how political parties engage with women voters. Women are part of collective voting blocs in rural areas and are encouraged to vote by local political leaders, whereas in urban areas these clientelist networks to incentivise male leaders to engage with women voters are absent (Cheema *et al*. 2020). The absence of these networks may be the cause behind non-engagement by political parties as they do not see women as part of a voting bloc in urban areas where constituencies tend to be more mixed rather than clan or ethnic blocs being concentrated in one geographical area. The lack of engagement between political parties and women voters creates a strong sense of invisibility among women (Cheema *et al*. 2019). In fact, further analysis of the survey data shows that the contact between political parties and women around electoral mobilisation is much stronger in rural areas compared to metropolitan cities. Interestingly, the data reveals that this engagement gap between the rural and metropolitan does not hold for male voters.

The same study reveals that women's participation in party politics at the local level is limited. Interviews conducted with male local-level political party workers reveal that they disapprove of women's engagement in party politics and do not take steps to challenge community gender biases around this (Cheema *et al.* 2019). How the gender bias of political party workers affects women's recruitment into party politics is well documented in stable contexts. The A4EA findings confirm that the gendered norms work in similar ways in fragile polities as they do in stable contexts. While these gender biased views are not unique to fragile polities, the sticky norms do limit women's ability to participate in formal party politics. What is difficult to assess and requires further probing is whether norms are stickier in fragile contexts or easier to rupture given the fluidity of the context? While participation at the local level is limited, what do the studies reveal with respect to female candidacy and securing office?

With respect to the number of women in formal elected bodies, the parties in Pakistan are obliged to run female candidates because of provincial and national quotas. But this does not necessarily improve women's standing in party decision-making forums; female members of national and provincial assemblies are regularly excluded from the decision-making spaces (Khan *et al*. 2021). In Nigeria an absence of formal quotas means parties are not obliged to field

women candidates, and male-dominated party executive councils limit women's access to campaign funds and create informal pressure on women to stand down in favour of male candidates. In urban areas in Nigeria, lower numbers of women hold party offices compared to rural areas, despite a larger pool of female candidates (Oladepo *et al*. 2021). In both countries, the gender gap in running for public office is very stark (Khan 2020; Oladapo *et al*. 2021).

The facts that male party leaders promote candidates who are part of the 'old boys' network' and that women are adversely affected for lacking male homosocial capital are unsurprising (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2017). Studies conducted on political recruitment in stable democracies reveal similar patterns (Franceschet 2017; Hinsoja 2017; Verge and Calveria 2017) indicating that male gatekeeping is not unique to fragile polities. It should be noted that Lahore and Lagos are relatively stable parts of fragile polities. But in contexts where there is active conflict and state repression is high, male gatekeeping may create additional barriers to women being able to access political elites who may influence political engagement; and also, to access public authorities for protection and services. This leads to the question how do individual women at the local level navigate male gatekeepers to make claim on public authorities in fragile polities?

## 3.2  Women as intermediaries at the local level

Women are less likely than men to make claims and engage with state actors or other public authorities in stable contexts (Kruks-Wisner 2018). Fragile polities have multiple public authorities, not just local and state government. These multiple authorities overlap and at times compete or collaborate with each other. When governance problems arise, poor people approach different public authorities to resolve these with respect to dealing with public affairs and gaining access to goods and services, making the role of the intermediary/broker critical. For poor women, logistical and social barriers make it difficult to have direct access to public authorities. From A4EA research, several instances were reported of women lacking national identity cards, not speaking the official language, and/or not feeling confident navigating local-level bureaucracy, which means that they do not go to local government offices alone.

A4EA research on 'Governance at the Margins' explored how governance problems are experienced by poor households (including female members) using a diary method in Mozambique, Myanmar, and Pakistan. The research teams engaged with the same households over a 12-month period to explore how household members solve problems with respect to access to services and protection. The research teams also explored the role of intermediaries in mediating access for these poor households. These intermediaries do not

always hold formal public office but could be religious or clan leaders, local large landowners, or a part of established local elite.

In all three countries, the A4EA researchers found that women make claims for better service to public authorities on matters of health, access to finance, land disputes, and justice, but these claims are fewer compared to men. The women have to mediate access to all kinds of services through male family members at the household level, and through male intermediaries within their community. Women's access to services provided at the local level and from local-level decision-making bodies is unequal to men. It is difficult to ascertain from the data set whether female-headed households and women in general are more vulnerable to predatory forms of intermediation when accessing these services (Barnes *et al.* 2021).

The fact that women have to rely on male gatekeepers is hardly surprising given sticky gender norms (whether women can go out or not), and men possessing greater power within both formal representative and informal power structures (clan, etc). But local authorities reported in their interviews that no special provisions are made to help women overcome disadvantages as it is considered normal for women to have to rely on men for help (Barnes *et al.* 2021). In fact, the research team observed that the development programmes operating at the local level in these polities assumed women accessed services or entitlements on an equal basis, whereas the reality is starkly different (Barnes *et al.* 2021), and absence of support from local authorities limits women's engagement with them.

The A4EA researchers found very few female intermediaries or brokers in the selected research areas; female intermediaries were part of neighbourhood groups or community structures because of informal quotas deployed by political parties. The study found that some of these women were effective intermediaries, but in many instances their authority is challenged by male representatives and party leaders. For example, in Mozambique while the ruling party includes women in local governance roles, women community leaders are generally side-lined by the party leadership.

What also emerges is that women intermediaries are effective in mediating on what are considered 'women's issues' (health, welfare, domestic violence) as they feel they have been nominated to represent women's issues and have gained visibility in that respect. The following example (Box 3.1) from Mozambique reveals that women intermediaries are not only effective in addressing 'women's issues' but are also able to intervene on other issues by virtue of holding public office, and to organise public protests. However, their actions are limited by patriarchal norms.

# Box 3.1 Female intermediaries in Mozambique

The Mozambique A4EA research team observed how female intermediaries navigated claims made by women in their localities, Mualadzi and Cateme Sede. Some of the women became intermediaries through their roles in neighbourhood groups and community-level organisations. In Mualadzi the female intermediaries were neighbourhood group or community organisation leaders. The activities of the female intermediaries are mainly limited to domestic and family issues. In cases where the women are unable to solve these family problems, they have to ask for help from male intermediaries. The female intermediaries do, however, receive complaints about issues that are largely perceived to be within the 'male domain', i.e. public forum issues such as land disputes. But for these matters the female intermediaries would ask male intermediaries to resolve the issue. One female intermediary in Mualadzi used her position to mobilise women to take action on access to water. The Mualadzi Management Committee (MMC) and local citizens have been demanding for a long time that the mining companies and the government address the issue of water. After several petitions and reminders, MMC members, particularly the women as they are most affected as a lack of clean water impacts domestic chores, decided to take protest action. The female intermediary organised the women, and they decided to block the only bridge connecting the neighbourhood, forcing the government and mining company agents to walk. Despite this protest, the water problem has yet to be resolved.

Source: A4EA Mozambique Team (2020)

Women intermediaries have to draw upon a wide range of strategies to navigate social norms and male gatekeeping. In Pakistan, women intermediaries rely on their male relatives to bypass male gatekeeping by party and clan leaders. At times these male relatives act as proxies in places where the women do not have access. While this strategy helps navigate patriarchy, in the long run it entrenches biased social norms and strengthens the perception that women are unsuitable to hold local office.

In fragile polities, the obstacles women face to act as intermediaries are more significant compared to men. Very few women intermediaries are able to mediate beyond usual women's issues and use interpersonal capital to strengthen their own position. These female intermediaries have gained widespread public respect according to households and the community (Barnes *et al.* 2021).[4] In fact, these female intermediaries can mobilise others and protest

---

4   This observation is based on the perception of community members and the field researchers. For example, in Pakistan and Mozambique the intermediaries were selected from individuals that were

service failures, as can be seen from the Mozambique example above. In Pakistan, another female intermediary successfully mobilised people to occupy disputed land. These intermediaries are media savvy and use familial and other networks to channel demands. However, they are the exceptions.

## Box 3.2 *Aapa* (older sister): case of female intermediary in Pakistan

A female intermediary (*Aapa*) interviewed by the Pakistan A4EA research team was one of the strongest of the intermediaries selected as case studies. She is from an elite family in her village. She deals with issues ranging from land disputes to health, security, and financial issues. *Aapa* also mentioned that women come to her about sexual health (gynaecological issues, abortions, and sexual assaults), which are not commonly raised with male intermediaries. *Aapa* uses her existing networks with other intermediaries and influential people to solve the problems. She created an association for providing access to Covid-19-related health services. To do this she contacted other intermediaries and a doctor from a non-conflict location. Even though she is widely respected, she faces barriers because of her gender. For instance, she is not allowed to sit on the village mediation panel as this is a male space. *Aapa* sends her son as a proxy to ensure she has representation in this space and actively coordinates with influential male leaders through her son. Simultaneously, she uses the female space to mobilise women and social media to spread messages. *Aapa* pointed out that many of the male intermediaries dislike her because she has done things a lot of men cannot do. She was able to go to the district revenue officer and to army personnel to complain, which many men are unable to do as they either lack the social networks or could seem threatening to army personnel because of their gender. While this has earned her respect, she is also regarded as 'masculine' which is frowned upon.

Source: A4EA Pakistan Team (2020)

The findings draw attention to two key issues. First, female intermediaries use both their gender, class, and caste positions and their kinship/clan networks to promote their agenda. Thus, intersectionality emerges as a significant factor influencing their success. Of course, this requires further investigation as the role of intersectionality and women's ability to engage in local politics in fragile polities

---

highlighted by sample households in the first phase as being important intermediaries for them, which infers some degree of success. This is connected to researcher observations from over the course of the year they interviewed the intermediaries about what they actually managed to achieve.

is under explored (Chenoweth 2019). In mainstream gender and politics literature, the role of the family and proxy representation is viewed in a negative light (Nazneen 2018; Tadros 2014). Some argue, however, that this is a Western liberal bias against familial connections as pathways to politics and undermines the socially sanctioned pathways available to women to gain and exercise political power (Nazneen *et al.* 2014). Although it needs to be acknowledged that the use of familial or kin-based pathways for exercising power may undermine democratic norms. However, the role of the family in facilitating women's political agency requires further unpacking, especially in contexts where women's interaction in public forums is limited by sticky social norms and their main source of social capital is through these familial relations.

## 3.3  Women as protest activists and leaders in collective action

While women face gender-specific barriers when it comes to voting or acting as intermediaries/brokers, they can and do act collectively to protest injustices. Women participate in peace, socio-environmental, faith-based, youth, ethnicity, and natural resource movements in fragile polities (Earle 2011). Much of the A4EA research documents women-led protest actions and mass actions where women have participated in significant numbers in fragile polities (Atela *et al.* 2021; Khan *et al.* 2021; Tadros and Edwards 2020). These protests range from small-scale localised protests to national campaigns and movements where women participated as frontline activists and leaders. The following sections explore what factors enable expressions of collective agency by women and the gendered nature of these expressions.

## 3.4  Gendered expressions of protest repertories and tactics

The cases of women-led protests researched under A4EA reveal that women's 'repertoires of contention' (Tilly and Tarrow 2015) include expressions that draw attention to their social role as caregivers. This is a not a new finding as WPS literature details peace movements in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, and other countries led by women in conflict-affected settings where these women have highlighted their social role (Ray 2018; Tripp 2015). Women have used 'political motherhood' (de Alwais 1997) and maternalism to claim public space and to demand to know the whereabouts of those disappeared in anti-authoritarian movements in Argentina, Chile, and Egypt (Baldez 2002; Carreon and Moghadam 2015). In fragile polities, where the risk of state violence is high and there is limited space for dissent, this remains an effective strategy for contention. This is confirmed by the findings of Khan *et al.* (2021) who

investigated five different episodes of contentious politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2015) either led by women and/or linked to gender equality concerns in Pakistan. For example, women protestors participating in the PTM, demanding state accountability in KP use their roles as mothers, sisters, and daughters to claim public space and to demand answers about missing relatives. Similarly, the Hazara (an ethnic minority group in Balochistan Province) women's protests against bombings and state violence also frame their demands for security of their men as mothers, daughters, and sisters. Khan *et al.* (2021) show that the 'political motherhood' (de Alwais 1997) framing allows the women protestors to successfully navigate sticky social norms that place constraints on women's public presence in these conservative communities. It also reduces overt repression of these protests when women mobilise within the frame of idealised femininity and in the name of family welfare.

## Box 3.3 Gendered repertoire of protest performance

A gendered repertoire of protest allowed Hazara women to draw attention to the failure of public (male) authorities to protect women and men from violence. In one of the first protests, organised by the Hazara Democratic Party in 2012, about 100 Hazara women threw bangles at the provincial legislative assembly gate in a gesture meant to shame the male leaders (Khan *et al.* 2021). Throwing bangles implies that the legislative representatives are impotent and should wear bangles and stay at home (as only women wear bangles) and not be in the assembly.

The women leading the Chiango protests in Maputo, Mozambique, to demand better service and road safety from the local authorities, publicly wept and danced. They laid on the ground as if giving birth and cried to show they had borne the pain of motherhood and had a right to claim action on child safety.

Sources: Khan *et al.* (2021); Khan and Taela (2021)

Couder and King (2015) document that in contexts of extreme oppression women tend to rely on tactics that highlight their traditional roles. They examined the women's peace movement in Liberia and women's participation across the Middle East in pro-democracy movements, emphasising their traditional role and occupying public space that is not usually available to women. They point out that it is hard for state security agencies to mobilise against grieving mothers, sisters, and grandmothers (*ibid.*). Women often use non-violent strategies for mobilisation in fragile polities (Chenoweth 2019). In many protests, women's

demands are for lowering the risk of violence to everyone in the society which then reduces the risk of violence from the police and security agencies.

The response of security forces to women's collective action is mediated by psychological factors – i.e. they feel less threatened by the presence of large groups of women. In fact, the WiRe data set that examined historically women's participation in civil resistance shows that a higher participation of women is strongly correlated with non-violent strategies, which subsequently lowers the risk of violent suppression from the state (Chenoweth 2019). However, the use of gendered repertoire is not a failsafe strategy. These protest performances that are contained within the limits of 'normative femininity' (Parashar 2010) – i.e. actions that are acceptable and ideal for only 'females' – can reinforce traditional views and gender norms. They can also at times trigger sanctions from community members (see Section 4).

It should also be acknowledged that the emphasis on familial roles can be a double-edged sword for women protestors as it undermines space for women who are active in protests but do not associate with such identity. Studies of women's protests in Mozambique and Pakistan draw attention to the fact that while the 'political motherhood' framing and emphasis on women's carer role allow women protestors to 'disrupt their gendered and political habitus to… call for the state to perform its duties' (Khan and Taela 2021: 1), it may limit women's agency (Domingo *et al*. 2015). The A4EA research on women-led protests in Egypt, Mozambique, and Pakistan shows that women must contest sticky norms both at home and within the community. Norms that regulate women's bodies – particularly those pertaining to women's primary duty as carer; around which spaces are male-only or female-only; that regulate mobility and sexuality (notions of honour, exposure of bodies, and risk of sexual violence) – affect women's decisions to protest. Women protest leaders in the Pakistan study reported that they have to manage their care work at home and contend with the community's biased perception about women's leadership capabilities.

However, the pressure to conform to gender norms leads women to develop 'tactical innovations' (Couder and King 2015) to navigate them. A4EA research reveals how women develop protest tactics to circumvent the ways bodies are regulated and use bodies as a central part of protest performance in a non-violent way.

# Box 3.4 Tactical innovations to navigate gender norms

The Lady Health Worker movement in Pakistan (community health workers who mobilise for decent work conditions) used sit-ins to block major roads and repudiate the norm that women should not occupy public space. Female students in Egypt used public performance – art, songs, dance, and poetry – to draw attention to the body and sexual harassment and break the silence on issues that are taboo. The #BBOG protest organisers decided to perform daily sit-ins in front of the Unity Fountain in Abuja, Nigeria – drawing attention to the presence of their bodies in public – to keep the focus on the missing Chibok girls.

The following observation by an Aurat March activist (an initiative started in Karachi, Pakistan to mark International Women's Day with protest about misogyny) draws attention to how performative strategies allow women's bodies to claim public space, navigate restrictive gender norms, and feel empowered:

> *The women are singing and dancing* [during the march]*... We had women coming from the Baloch* [a conservative region]*, missing person families, and those women were dancing. How many chances would she have gotten in her life to dance like this* [in public]*, or to feel so liberated, or to come in a space where so many women have come together?*
> (Interview by Ayesha Khan, 6 June 2019, Karachi)

Sources: Aina *et al.* (2019); Hamada *et al.* (2020); Khan and Taela (2021); Khan *et al.* (2021)

Apart from using the body to occupy public space in challenging gender norms, and to perform protests in a creative non-violent way (Butler 2015), women also contest how female bodies are perceived. For example, the Aurat March coined the slogan – *meri jism, meri marzi* (my body, my choice) to directly challenge controls over women's sexual and reproductive autonomy which are not discussed publicly in Pakistan.

Collectively, the use of bodies for protest performance draws attention to the vulnerability of the female body and its exclusion from public space and from enjoyment of rights. The collective performance of assembly (whether silent or vocal, and using art and symbolic gestures) conjures into being women's demands and makes public authorities take notice (Butler 2015).

Online has emerged as a space for building counter-publics and for moulding discourse around protest issues and sustaining movements (Earle 2011). Social media platforms are extensively used by women activists. The #BBOG campaign garnered international support and gained visibility using social media in its first few months (Aina *et al*. 2019). Aina *et al.* (2019) point out that #BBOG's extensive use of social media was a strategic decision to bypass the control the political regime and male elites had over traditional print and electronic media.

However, visibility on social media also creates significant personal risk for women activists. Women protest leaders of the Aurat March and the Hazara women's movement in Pakistan, and anti-sexual harassment protestors in Egypt, reported being victims of online harassment including verbal abuse, threats of sexual violence, and threats towards family members. This is not unique, but it is gender specific in the sense that women leaders experience a higher level of sexual and gender-specific threats online than men. Research by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) shows globally about 66 per cent of female MPs have been harassed online (IPU 2016). Having an active presence on social media also increases the risk of surveillance by state security agencies.

## 3.5  What enables collective voice and agency?

What emerges from the analysis of the women-led protest cases in Egypt, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Pakistan is that they started with a one-off event that span into a series of protests 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 and Tarrow 2015: 7). The #BBOG campaign was triggered by the need to protest the kidnapping of Chibok school girls by Boko Haram. The anti-sexual harassment protests in Egypt were triggered by a specific incident caught on camera on the campus of Alexandria University, that shocked the public (Hamada *et al*. 2020). The Hazara women's protests were triggered by a series of bombings and violent attacks on Hazara men. The Hazara women decided to protest despite men forbidding it – as women had no other way to protect their menfolk (Khan *et al*. 2021). The Chiango protestors in Mozambique highlighted that while they were apprehensive in occupying public roads, protests were the only way to ensure the safety of their children (Khan and Taela 2021).

What needs to be considered is that while in these cases there were specific trigger events which featured excessive or extreme forms of violence, the protests did not occur in a vacuum (Tadros and Edwards 2020). These protests unfolded in contexts where the public (male) authorities have repeatedly failed women. Protests are a last resort for women and signal a change in how they view themselves as actors deserving of a response from authorities; as a way 'to be heard' (Gaventa 2022; Khan and Taela 2021).

Analysis of A4EA research on women-led protests reveals that the presence of two conditions lowers male resistance at the community level, enabling women to organise public protests. First, if women are perceived to be protesting on issues that are linked to community welfare or if they are seen to mobilise to protect their menfolk. Second, if levels of violence against men are high and so public space for contending mainstream political issues are closed off to them. This creates an opening where mobilising around 'women's issues' is actually a means of contesting the legitimacy of the regime (Waylen 2015).

Once initial protests are triggered, what creates legitimacy for women's demands? According to A4EA analysis the framing plays a key role. When women protestors establish how they are directly affected by a lack of services and by insecurity, and demonstrate why the public authorities need to address these gaps to enable them to play their traditional carer roles, pressure is created for action by the public authorities.

## Box 3.5 Legitimising claims and sustaining collective action

In Pakistan, women activists supported claims made by other women and actively participated in protest activities organised by other movements to strengthen these activities. The Aurat March organisers came out in support of the PTM, and organised protests. The Hazara women protest leaders also participated in sit-ins organised by the PTM. For the Hazara women's protests, the Aurat Foundation helped arrange for coffins and shrouds to amplify the Hazara women's message that they were blocking the road and refusing to bury their dead. In Nigeria, the #BBOG campaign drew heavily on national and international alliances established with other civil society actors for creating a wide-based support.

Sources: Aina *et al*. (2019); Khan *et al*. (2021)

Working horizontally ensures that protests gain legitimacy among a wide range of actors and are sustained over time. Analysis of women-led protests in Egypt and Pakistan reveals that women protestors in civil resistance campaigns tend to work horizontally – reaching out to multiple actors which creates a wide support base (Hamada *et al*. 2020; Khan *et al*. 2021). These findings coincide broadly with the findings from feminist movement literature (Molyneux 2001; Nazneen and Okech 2021). The interpersonal capital of individual women protest leaders plays a key role in mitigating risks and sustaining the protest. Khan and Taela (2021: 8), in their analysis of women-led protests in Mozambique and Pakistan,

point out that the women protest leaders had engaged with 'multiple allies, including religious and ethnic associations, political organizations and feminist groups, to mitigate the considerable risks caused by their disruption'. These women protest leaders had worked horizontally, focusing on intersectional concerns and supporting other protest movements, expressing solidarity both on and offline.

Working horizontally is not without its tensions. In many instances these tensions arise along intersectional lines. For example, the lady health workers and Hazara women protestors reported that they felt uncomfortable with the explicit slogans used by the Aurat March organisers around female bodily autonomy. Part of this discomfort arose from the fact that association with these slogans would place them in jeopardy in their own communities. They also did not agree with the strategies deployed by the Aurat March (Khan *et al*. 2021). These tensions need to be navigated by protest leaders.

While alliances with other civil society actors amplify voice and create widespread legitimacy, A4EA research shows that the women protest leaders and activists in the case studies were wary about engaging with mainstream political parties. Formal engagements with political parties meant the women protest leaders faced increased risk of arrest and other forms of persecution, and a loss of legitimacy (Atela *et al.* 2021; Khan *et al.* 2021; Khan and Taela 2021).

While the protestors were wary about engaging with political parties, they were less so about engaging with sympathetic elected representatives. The women protest leaders in Pakistan strategically used their connections with female MPs and representatives in provincial assemblies to forward their agenda. This is not a new strategy – mainstream gender and politics literature shows that the connection between autonomous women's movements and feminist actors inside the state are key for gender equality policy advances (Htun and Weldon 2018). However, not all female representatives are feminists, and while these connections are helpful to gain access to policy space (Nazneen *et al.* 2019), state action is mediated by many different factors.

It is telling which parts of the state women protest leaders chose to engage as allies. The #BBOG leaders engaged with the Human Rights Commission. The #BBOG campaign was trying to create a national missing persons' register to track missing people during conflicts. A member noted that:

> *The purpose of the register was to force the government to acknowledge that the girls were missing and begin working on it*. (Atela *et al.* 2021: 321)

# Box 3.6 Political parties: uneasy alliance

In the case studies examined by A4EA, alliances with political parties produced mixed results with respect to strengthening women-led protests. In Pakistan, engagement with the Hazara Democratic Party allowed the Hazara women protest leaders to legitimise their cause and gain support from their extremely conservative menfolk. The women protest leaders found themselves having to negotiate constraints placed on them by the party on what they could do or say – but they also received material support from the party to travel to protest venues and to bypass the government ban on travelling on buses. Closer engagement with political parties, however, can carry the risk of loss of legitimacy and state repression. The #BBOG campaign leaders in Nigeria were careful not to be closely associated with any political parties. One of the protest organisers pointed out to the A4EA researchers:

> *We ensure members drop their political party affiliations at the park entrance and pick them up when you are leaving. And we have done well in that regard, so it is not a challenge*.
> (Atela *et al.* 2021: 327)

Sources: Aina *et al.* (2019); Atela *et al.* (2021); Khan *et al.* (2021)

The protest leaders in Pakistan engaged with the National Women's Commission (Khan *et al.* 2021). In Egypt, the network between the members of the anti-sexual harassment units at the three universities and the National Commission for Women (NCW) was effective in producing results (Hamada *et al.* 2019). This strategy, of course, points to the fact that the state is not monolithic (Staudt 1990). There are openings for engagement with state bodies despite the space for contention shrinking in these fragile polities.

The A4EA research also shows that the women protest leaders were careful about forming alliances with donors, international development agencies, and international non-governmental organisations. In Egypt, Nigeria, and Pakistan the rise of nationalist and populist religious forces in politics means that there is a high level of risk that connections with donors can be misconstrued as proof of activists peddling a 'Western or imperialist agenda' (Baksh and Harcourt 2015; Nazneen and Okech 2021; Tadros and Khan 2018). The #BBOG protest leaders avoided receiving any form of foreign funding. They received several offers of help from foreign governments, including Denmark, and from the United Nations, but they refused (Atela *et al*. 2021).

Other women-led protests in Pakistan have also maintained their autonomy by not accepting any donor funds. The protest leaders and activists have been

careful in the way their demands are framed so that they are associated with local traditions and national history. But these steps may not always mitigate the risk of binary frames deployed by oppositional forces (Western/secular versus culturally grounded) and being branded as 'inauthentic or Western' (Tadros and Khan 2018).

# 4. Women's political agency: impact on empowerment and accountability

So far, this paper has explored findings on a range of expressions of political agency by women in fragile polities. This section now explores the kind of response the women were able to secure from public authorities. It also focuses on how these expressions of individual and collective political agency influence women's empowerment and accountability relations with powerholders.

The A4EA findings in respect to women's voting in urban areas reveal a significant gender gap in Nigeria and Pakistan. While voting is an individual act; ethnic, racial or class voting blocs do exert considerable influence on how the political agenda is set. However, women collectively using their votes to strategically bring pressure on political parties to advance gender equality face significant barriers. This is because women are not a homogeneous group, and their interests are fragmented. In most countries women's movements that channel gender equality demands are weak in terms of electoral politics compared to other social groups competing for the attention of political parties. Gender equality concerns do not garner votes, which means political parties have little interest in mobilising women voters based on these issues (Waylen *et al*. 2013).

The A4EA Pakistan study reveals that political parties invest less on targeting women voters in urban areas than in rural areas. This is because in rural areas women are mobilised by clan/tribal/ethnic leaders as voting blocs to increase support for specific parties. The A4EA studies in Nigeria and Pakistan also reveal that the gender gap in women's political participation (voting) cannot be explained away by their lack of access to resources, care burdens (dependency ratio), or educational level. These findings indicate that women's political empowerment requires more than education (for awareness), and a lessening of care burdens. It needs active intervention that will shift how male gatekeepers and political parties engage with women.

These findings draw attention to the accountability gap that exists between female citizens in urban areas and elected representatives. If women are not voting, they are not participating in exercising vertical accountability, and their lack of engagement is a result that is not a straightforward 'choice'. Addressing this gap requires calling to account bodies such as the election commission and local authorities at the community level. However, donor interventions and public policy rarely focus on accountability for promoting gender equality, i.e. creating and holding public authorities to account for gendered failure.

The A4EA findings show that women do make claims on local authorities and navigate access to services and protection through the men in their households and through intermediaries. But the fact that women must navigate through men shows that their agency compared to men is constrained, which has an adverse impact on whether public authorities or intermediaries see women as an effective constituency and feel obligated to meet their demands. While female intermediaries may feel a sense of empowerment at the personal level, their status as legitimate political actors remains challenged. In addition, while many of the female intermediaries that the A4EA researchers interviewed stated they felt obligated to respond to the needs raised by women in their communities, their being responsive to the needs of local women does not mean that the (male) public authorities are accountable to the women. Men remain the movers and shakers within these communities where citizen–public authority relations are already tenuous.

Goetz (2008) draws attention to the fact that women are placed at a disadvantage as principals claiming accountability given their subordinate status in relation to men at home and in the community. The fact that women must mediate their claims to public authorities through men constrains their agency as claimants demanding answers. As individual actors, if women lack an independent source of power or resources, they are unable to exercise voice to make demands. This creates a perverse loop, as public authorities remain uninformed or less informed about women's needs or claims.

Given that individual expressions of political agency have limited impact on women's political empowerment at a collective level, do women-led protests and women's participation in civil resistance in fragile polities lead to their empowerment in the long term? Do expressions of collective agency lead to changes in relationships women have with public authorities? Existing literature on women's participation in civil resistance argues that it increases the possibility of success (Chenoweth 2019) and contains the possibility of norm change (Tripp 2015). What do the A4EA cases reveal?

Women protest leaders and activists in the A4EA cases reported an increased sense of critical awareness about their rights and position in society. The Chiango protest activists reported that they became aware of other forms of relationship beyond their neighbourhood power structures (Khan and Taela 2021). Women protestors also developed a sense of collective power, i.e. the ability to come and act together (Khan *et al*. 2021). Being able to navigate male gatekeepers and sticky norms, and even to repudiate these norms helped the women protestors establish their place as claimants (Khan and Taela 2021). This individual-level change is a critical factor for women developing skill sets and a collective identity (Rowlands 1997).

The A4EA cases also reveal that the women-led protests were able to elicit responses from public authorities (e.g. local government, national actors, or the military). The anti-sexual harassment protests in Egypt, the Chiango protest in Mozambique, the women-led protests against state violence and misogyny in Pakistan, all highlighted localised issues at the national level and secured recognition from public authorities. For example, as a result of the anti-sexual harassment protests in Egypt the university authorities took steps to form committees and policies to address sexual harassment on campus. In the case of the Chiango protests, the President came and met the family who lost their child and promised that infrastructure would be built to stop traffic accidents. In some instances, public authorities took concrete action, for example the #BBOG campaign secured a practical response from the Nigerian regime (Atela *et al*. 2021). These findings confirm that there is a need to test the hypothesis of whether involvement of women in civil resistance leads to a higher possibility of success (Chenoweth 2019).

Evidence from Pakistan shows that for some women protest leaders, participation in protests serves as a stepping stone for entering formal politics. For Pakistani women representatives, alliances with protests bolsters their legitimacy. These qualitative findings on the pathways through which women emerge and strengthen their position as leaders require further exploration (Khan *et al*. 2021).

While participation in protests may help build leadership skills (public speaking, media engagement, navigating social norms, and alliance building), how far does an increased sense of awareness and empowerment at the individual level lead to changes in relationships with public authorities?

Analysis of A4EA evidence shows that women protestors as a group were able to secure a successful response to their demands, but these were for particular issues and within specific contexts. The question remains whether these particular instances of responsiveness can lead to systemic change for women. A key issue to explore here, which requires analysis of a larger data set and comparative research, is whether these instances of women being able to secure response leads to the beginnings of public engagement by women in fragile polities. Do these instances also instil a sense of obligation within public authorities towards women as claim-makers? Would this result in a shift in the way the rules of governance are set? And in the long term would these beginnings of a new sense of obligation toward meeting gender needs and equality demands lead to a shift in the nature of the social contract? It should be noted that public authorities are not the sole custodians of the social contract. The social contract is shaped over time by different actors, and only a very small part of this contract is the explicit political content about the rules of governance.

A change in the social contract also implies a change in women's position and their interaction with their household and their community.

Evidence from the A4EA study on how household and community members view expressions of women's political agency reveals that while established gender norms have been disrupted, women face significant barriers from their own family and community members. The studies of women-led protests in Egypt and Pakistan reveal that women protestors face backlash from their own communities. A lady health worker interviewed for the Pakistan study (Khan *et al*. 2019: 16) made the following observation:

> *If a woman starts becoming strong, men try to scare her off. If you are brave, then no one has the courage to even touch you. It's the fear inside us, that's it. Women are made weak because of their family members.*

Backlash also comes from public authorities, which reveals a significant personal risk for women protestors. The Aurat March protestors and protestors in Egypt against sexual harassment were attacked on social and news media for drawing attention to everyday misogyny. Aurat March organisers were officially sanctioned by the KP assembly for being obscene and destroying family norms (Khan *et al*. 2021).

What is important to note is that civic space or space for dissent in fragile polities is shrinking. Regimes have pushed through additional restrictions on social and other forms of media. Attacks on women protestors are taking place within this context – creating a perverse loop where the space for publicly challenging gender norms will diminish. This will in turn limit space for demanding accountability from public authorities.

# 5.  Conclusions

A4EA research has focused on how women express political agency in fragile polities. The major findings discussed in this paper nuance our understandings of the contexts within which this research took place. The findings also provide clear pathways for strengthening women's political agency. Based on the findings the following points can be made.

First, a key contribution of the A4EA research on women's individual agency is that it draws attention to the stark gender gap that exists in women's political participation (in voting and party politics) in urban areas in fragile polities, and that this gap cannot be fully explained by the usual explanations offered for lower levels of female political engagement: lack of education, higher burden of care work, etc. What the findings show is that women's engagement in political activities is mediated by male gatekeepers at the household and community levels. The findings also show how context-specific gender norms limit women's ability to engage in formal political activities and protect their interests. These sticky norms are further reinforced by local state agencies and political party gatekeepers who accept exclusion of women and mediation by men. The fact that sticky norms endure in spite of women's participation in public protests implies that norms may become impediments to social cohesion. Breaking this perverse loop between household and community and political parties requires active intervention – working with political parties and male gatekeepers to shift these sticky social norms.

Second, the A4EA research on women-led protests nuances our understanding of how despite the sticky norms and male gatekeeping women make claims and exercise collective political agency. Women-led protests demanding answers for service and protection failures demonstrate that women can experience governance failures differently from men (Cornwall 2017). The findings also confirm that the way women choose to perform protest acts is gendered – as carers and bearers of tradition. By extending their social roles women try to minimise the risk they face from their own communities and security agencies (Couder and King 2015). In many cases, however, this extension of the private role does not challenge community norms around gender roles/gender equality. Furthermore, mobilising to make claims also exposes women to gender-specific risks – the threat of sexual violence, verbal abuse online, and backlash from their own communities. While the findings on the gender-specific nature of performativity is not new, the studies reveal how women link their social roles to making claims as citizens, which is distinctively different in some of the settings in the A4EA studies from how men make claims and engage in contentious politics. The findings also show that women's participation in protests increases their critical awareness (power within), and instils in them a collective sense of

belonging and ability to act together (power with). While recent WiRe data shows that the possibility of success in civil protests increases with women's participation, this requires further systematic research (Chenoweth 2019). A4EA findings contribute by adding empirical cases to this body of work.

A4EA findings also show that success in eliciting responses from public authorities may be fleeting. Domingo *et al*. (2015: 85) point out that there is no 'automatic link between women's presence and voice in public life and transformative change'. Longitudinal and historical research is needed to explore whether incidents of micro-accountability germinate the seeds for change, creating a legacy for public engagement by women, and a change in the social contract that exists between female citizens and powerholders.

Third, while the sample is small, in all the A4EA research settings, the women protest leaders who engage with formal political institutions or who advance to holding leadership positions in mass protests, are generally from a certain class and have access to social and or political capital. The A4EA research findings help to draw insights on how, for women intermediaries, protest leaders and activists, class, ethnicity, and other identities intersect with their sex/gender position and influence their political agency. Systematic data on how intersectionality affects women's political agency is not robust in the A4EA research as the sample size is small. This kind of data is also limited for other existing bodies of research (Chenoweth 2019). How intersecting inequalities interact with gender in fragile polities and limit women's political agency needs further research (*ibid.*). While race, class, caste, age, and ethnicity may affect men's political agency, women face an additional challenge as their sex/gender acts as an impediment. Addressing this gap would advance our understanding of the links between sex/gender identity, agency, and women's empowerment.

Fourth, A4EA research on women-led protests in fragile polities shows that the women's rights agenda may at times be in contention with the security agenda. This finding is not unique to A4EA research. The WPS literature has also drawn attention to the fact that for women protestors and feminist groups working to support women's activism, this disjuncture poses a significant risk as security agencies clamp down on social and political action. The rise of nationalism and authoritarian proclivities among regimes in fragile polities, means that for women's rights organisations and organisations working to support women's political empowerment there is no one blanket strategy. They have to simultaneously work on publicly calling the state to account for meeting gender equity goals while minimising threats from security agencies to individual women activists. Minimising risks may involve drawing media attention to specific issues and protests, the creative use of social media, and using courts to file for protection orders. It may also include keeping informal channels open to interact with state security apparatus, which carries its own risks as close connection

with security agencies may threaten women's rights organisations' legitimacy. A key area of work for women's rights organisations is to frame counter narratives on women's empowerment and gender equality and 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.

Lastly, for donors working in fragile polities, supporting women's political agency requires going beyond funding programmes based on pre-set agendas and blueprints. Donors face a significant challenge in funding rights-based work in fragile polities, as at times these kinds of programmes are deemed subversive by the regimes. Women's rights work, particularly actions focused on demanding state accountability, may be deemed as such. Moreover, funding requirements and processes used by donor agencies may lack the flexibility needed to support small and medium-sized women's rights organisations that work closely on the ground. Apart from these factors, donors also prioritise working with bureaucracies to minimise transaction costs. All these factors may inhibit donors from developing contextualised, bottom-up interventions that tackle sticky gender norms, and create effective pro-gender equality networks. Overcoming these barriers would require donors to be agile, imaginative, and to act as allies to women's rights organisations.

# References

A4EA Mozambique Team (2020) 'Gender Episodes', mimeo, Maputo: Kaleidoscopio

A4EA Pakistan Team (2020) 'Governance at the Margins (Pakistan) – Analysis of Gender', mimeo, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

Agarwal, B. (2010) *Gender and Green Governance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Aina, T.A.; Atela, M.; Ojebode, A.; Dayil, P. and Aremu, F. (2019) *Beyond Tweets and Screams: Action for Empowerment and Accountability in Nigeria – The Case of the #BBOG Movement*, IDS Working Paper 529, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (accessed 24 May 2022)

Anderson, C.; McGee, R.; Nampoothiri, N.J. and Gaventa, J. with Forquilha, S.; Ibeh, Z.; Ibezim-Ohaeri, V.; Jawed, A.; Khan, A.; Pereira, C. and Shankland, A. (2021) *Navigating Civic Space in a Time of Covid: Synthesis Report*, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: **10.19088/A4EA.2021.002** (accessed 9 May 2022)

Atela, M.; Ojebode, A.; Makokha, R.; Otieno, M. and Aina, T. (2021) '**Women Organising in Fragility and Conflict: Lessons from the #BringBackOurGirls Movement, Nigeria**', *Gender and Development* 29.2–3: 313–34, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2021.1979323 (accessed 25 April 2022)

Baksh. R. and Harcourt, W. (eds) (2015) *The Oxford Handbook of Transnational Feminist Movements*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Baldez, L. (2002) *Why Women Protest: Women's Movements in Chile*, New York NY: Cambridge University Press

Barnes, K. *et al.* (2021) *Understanding Governance from the Margins: What Does it Mean in Practice?*, A4EA Policy and Practice Paper, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/A4EA.2021.003 (accessed 21 June 2022)

Bjarnegård, E. and Kenny, M. (2017) 'Who, Where and How? Informal Institutions and the Third Generation of Research on Gendered Dynamics in Political Recruitment', in G. Waylen (ed.), *Gender and Informal Institutions*, Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield

Butler, J. (2015) *Notes Towards and Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

Carothers, T. (2016) *Democracy Support Strategies: Leading Women into Empowerment*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (accessed 22 April 2022)

Carreon, M.E. and Moghadam, V.M. (2015) ' "Resistance is Fertile": Revisiting Maternalist Frames across Cases of Women's Mobilization', *Women's Studies International Forum* 51: 19–30

Chandra, K. and Potter, A. (2016) 'Do Urban Voters in India Vote less?', *Economic and Political Weekly* 2.39: 58–68

Cheema, A.; Khan, S. and Khan Mohmand, S. (2021) 'Gender Role and Attitudes, Women's Agency and Gender Impact of Covid-19 Shocks', draft article, Lahore: Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives

Cheema, A.; Khan, S.; Khan Mohmand, S. and Liaqat, A. (2019) *Invisible Citizens: Why More Women in Pakistan Do Not Vote*, IDS Working Paper 524, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (accessed 9 May 2022)

Cheema, A.; Khan, S.; Khan Mohmand, S. and Rauf, S. (2020) 'Women's Claim-Making and Barriers to Entry as Political Candidates and Covid-19 Fragilities in Metropolitan Contexts', draft article, Lahore: Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives

Cheema, A.; Khan, S.; Liaqat, A. and Khan Mohmand, S. (2022) '**Canvassing the Gatekeepers: A Field Experiment to Increase Women Voters' Turnout in Pakistan**', *American Political Science Review* (advance online publication), DOI: 10.1017/S0003055422000375 (accessed 23 May 2022)

Cheema, A.; Liaqat, A.; Khan, S.; Khan Mohmand, S. and Rauf, S.F. (2021) *The Empty Promise of Urbanisation: Women's Political Participation in Pakistan*, IDS Working Paper 547, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: **10.19088/IDS.2021.021** (accessed 22 April 2022)

Chenoweth, E. (2019) *Women's Participation and the Fate of Nonviolent Campaigns: A Report on the Women in Resistance (WiRe) Data Set*, Broomfield CO: One Earth Future Foundation

Chowbey, P. (2016) 'Employment, Masculinities, and Domestic Violence in "Fragile" Contexts: Pakistani Women in Pakistan and the UK', *Gender and Development* 24.3: 493–509

Cornwall, A. (2017) *The Role of Social and Political Action in Advancing Women's Rights, Empowerment, and Accountability to Women*, IDS Working Paper 488, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (accessed 9 May 2022)

Couder, A.M. and King, M.E. (2015) 'Women in Civil Resistance', in M.M. Kurtz and L.R. Kurtz (eds), *Women, War and Violence*, Santa Barbara CA: Praeger

de Alwais, M. (1997) 'Motherhood as a Space for Protest', in A. Basu and P. Jeffery (eds), *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicised Religion in South Asia*, London: Routledge

Domingo, P. *et al.* (2015) *Women's Voice in Leadership and Decision-Making: Assessing the Evidence*, London: Overseas Development Institute

Earle, L. (2011) *The Dynamics of Social Movements in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States*, Issues Paper, Birmingham: GSDRC Publications (accessed 23 June 2021)

Franceschet, S. (2017) 'Disentangling Informality and Informal Rules: Explaining Gender Inequality in Chile's Executive Branch', in G. Waylen (ed.), *Gender and Informal Institutions*, Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield

Gaventa, J. (2022) 'Repertoires of Social and Political Action in Challenging Settings', draft manuscript, Brighton: Action for Empowerment and Accountability

Gaventa, J. and Oswald, K. (2019) *Empowerment and Accountability in Difficult Settings: What Are We Learning? Key Messages Emerging from the Action for Empowerment and Accountability Programme*, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (accessed 9 May 2022)

Goetz, A.M. (2008) *Progress of the World's Women 2008/2009: Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability*, New York NY: UN Women

Goetz, A.M. and Hassim, S. (2003) *No Shortcuts to Power, African Women in Politics and Policy Making*, London: Zed Books

Green, D. (2017) *Theories of Change for Promoting Empowerment and Accountability in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings*, IDS Working Paper 499, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (accessed 9 May 2022)

Hamada, A.; Kheir, A.; Hamdy, E. and Youssif H. (2020) '**Fighting Sexual Harassment on Campus: How Local Contexts of Different Universities Affect the Dynamics and Outcome of these Efforts**', *IDS Bulletin* 51.2: 21–42, DOI: **10.19088/1968-2020.128** (accessed 23 May 2022)

Hinsoja, M. (2017) 'An Alternate Story of Formal Rules and Informal Institutions: Quota Laws in Latin America', in G. Waylen (ed.), *Gender and Informal Institutions*, Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield

Htun, M. and Weldon, S.L. (eds) (2018) *The Logics of Gender Justice: State Action on Women's Rights*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

IPU (2021) *Inter Parliamentary Data Set*, Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union

IPU (2016) *Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women Parliamentarians*, Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union (accessed 25 May 2022)

Joshi, A. (n.d.) 'Standing on Hollowed Ground: Accountability in Fragile Polities', draft article, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

Khan, A. and Taela. K. (2021) ' "If We Stay at Home, Nothing Changes": Gendered Acts of Citizenship from Mozambique and Pakistan', draft manuscript, Brighton: Action for Empowerment and Accountability

Khan, A.; Jawed, A. and Qidwai, K. (2021) '**Women and Protest Politics in Pakistan**', *Gender and Development* 29.2–3: 391–410, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2021.1981623 (accessed 25 April 2022)

Khan, A.; Jawad, A. and Qidwai, K. (2019) ' "We have to be Everywhere": Women and Protest Politics in Pakistan', December, draft manuscript, Karachi: Collective for Social Science Research

Khan, A.; Naqvi, S. and Yousuf, Z. (2020) '**Women Politicians Navigating the "Hostile Environment" in Pakistan**', *IDS Bulletin* 51.2: 43–62, DOI: **10.19088/1968-2020.129** (accessed 19 May 2022)

Kruks-Wisner, G. (2018) *Claiming the State Active Citizenship and Social Welfare in Rural India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Lewin, T. (2021) '**Nothing Is As It Seems: "Discourse Capture" and Backlash Politics**', *Gender and Development* 29.2–3: 253–68, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2021.1977047 (accessed 26 May 2022)

Molyneux, M. (2001) *Women's Movements in International Perspective: Latin America and Beyond*, Berlin: Springer

Nazneen, S. (2018) *Gender and Intersecting Inequalities in Local Government in South Asia*, IDS Working Paper 507, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (accessed 23 May 2022)

Nazneen, S. and Okech, A. (2021) '**Feminist Protests and Politics in a World of Crisis**', *Gender and Development* 29.2–3: 231–52, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2021.2005358 (accessed 25 May 2022)

Nazneen, S.; Ehsan, I. and Hasan, B. (2014) 'Exceptional Women?: Reserve Councillors in Municipal Corporations in Bangladesh', in M. Tadros (ed.), *Women in Politics*, London: Zed Books

Nazneen, S.; Hickey, S. and Sifiaki, E. (2019) *Negotiating Gender Equality in the Global South: The Case of Domestic Violence Policy*, London: Routledge

Oladapo, O.A.; Atela, M. and Agbalajobi, D.T. (2021) *Women's Political Participation and its Predictors in Northern and Southern Nigeria*, IDS Working Paper 548, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: **10.19088/IDS.2021.023** (accessed 22 April 2022)

Osaghae, E. (2007) 'Fragile States', in A. Cornwall and D. Eade (eds), *Deconstructing Development Discourse: Buzzwords and Fuzzwords*, Rugby: Practical Action Publishing

Parashar, S. (2010) 'The Sacred and the Sacrilegious: Exploring Women's "Politics" and "Agency" in Radical Religious Movements in South Asia', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 11.3–4: 435–55, DOI: 10.1080/14690764.2010.546117

PASGR (2022) 'Gender Impact of Covid 19', mimeo, Nairobi: Partnership for African Social and Governance Research

Ray, P. (2018) 'Political Motherhood and a Spectacular Resistance: (Re)examining the Kangla Fort Protest, Manipur', *South Asian History and Culture* 9.4: 435–48

Rowlands, J. (1997) *Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras*, Oxford: Oxfam

Staudt, K. (1990) *Women, International Development and Politics: The Bureaucratic Mire*, Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press

Tadros, M. (ed.) (2014) *Women in Politics: Gender, Power and Development, Feminisms and Development*, London and New York NY: Zed Books

Tadros, M. and Edwards, J. (2020) '**Collective Struggles Against Sexual Harassment: What We Have Learnt About Pathways to Accountability and their Outcomes**', *IDS Bulletin* 51.2: 1–20, DOI: **10.19088/1968-2020.127** (accessed 24 May 2022)

Tadros, M. and Khan, A. (2018) '**Challenging Binaries to Promote Gender Equality**', *Feminist Dissent* 3: 1–22, DOI: 10.31273/fd.n3.2018 (accessed 25 April 2022)

Tangi, L. (2020) '**Uniting Against the Tides: Filipino "Shefarers" Organising Against Sexual Harassment**', *IDS Bulletin* 51.2: 97–111, DOI: **10.19088/1968-2020.132** (accessed 9 May 2022)

*The Guardian* (2021) '**Four Men Arrested over Violence at Kabul Women's Rights March, Say Taliban**', 5 September (accessed 22 April 2022)

Tilly, C. and Tarrow, S. (2015) *Contentious Politics*, 2nd ed., New York NY: Oxford University Press

Tripp, A.M. (2015) *Women and Power in Post Conflict Africa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Verge, T. and Claveria, S. (2017) 'Party Office, Homosocial Capital and Gendered Political Recruitment', in G. Waylen (ed.), *Gender and Informal Institutions*, Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield

Waylen, G. (2015) 'Engendering Crisis of Democracy: Institutions, Representation, Participation', *Government and Opposition* 50.3: 495–520

Waylen, G.; Celis, K.; Kantola, J. and Weldon, S.L. (eds) (2013) *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

# institute of development studies

Delivering world-class research, learning and teaching that transforms the knowledge, action and leadership needed for more equitable and sustainable development globally.