



# *Akademik Eğitim ve Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* (AJESS Journal)

## ***The Political Participation of Algerian Women and Their Role in Local and Parliamentary Elected Councils : From “Quota Numbers” to “Representation Paralysis”: An In-Depth Sociopolitical Study of a Fifteen-Year Trajectory (2012–2026)***

Lakhdar Khatir, PhD Student, Department of Sociology, University of Algiers 2, Algeria  
Lakhdar.khatir@univ-alger2.dz

Cherif Zahra, Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Algiers 2, Algeria  
Chrif.zahra@univ-alger2.dz

### **Article History**

Received: 31/07/2026 ; Accepted: 28/09/2026 ; Published: 05/10/2026

### **Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the trajectory of Algerian women's political participation in local elected councils and the National People's Assembly during the period from 2012 to 2026, through a sociopolitical approach focusing on the relationship between numerical representation, substantive representation, and positions of influence within elected institutions. The study is based on the assumption that the quantitative increase in women's presence, particularly following the adoption of electoral quota mechanisms in 2012, does not automatically ensure sustainable representation or access to leadership and decision-making positions. The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach based on official electoral data, the Inter-Parliamentary Union databases, and relevant sociological and political literature. The findings indicate a decline in women's representation in the National People's Assembly from 31.6% in 2012 to 6.1% in July 2026, alongside the continued limited presence of women in local leadership positions. The study concludes that the challenge of women's political participation is linked to the mechanisms through which political representation is produced and sustained, rather than merely to the number of female candidates.

**Keywords:** Algerian women; political participation; political representation; electoral quota; elected councils.

### **Introduction**

Women's participation in political life occupies a central position in contemporary political sociology, as it extends beyond the issue of numerical presence within elected institutions to constitute an entry point for analyzing the distribution of power, the mechanisms through which political elites are produced, and the limits of integrating different social groups into decision-making processes. Women's political representation is therefore not measured solely by the number of women occupying seats in parliament or local councils; it is also related to the capacity of the political system, political parties, and electoral institutions to transform the legal right to participate into actual opportunities to access decision-making positions, remain in them, and exercise meaningful roles within these institutions. From this perspective, women's participation constitutes a sociological indicator through which the relationship between the state and society, between legislation and practice, and between the principle of legal equality and persistent inequalities in access to power can be examined.

This issue is particularly significant in societies that have moved from formally recognizing equality among citizens to adopting institutional measures aimed at addressing historical imbalances in women's representation. The introduction of electoral quotas represents, in essence, an institutional intervention designed to reorganize opportunities for entering the political sphere; however, it does not necessarily imply a parallel transformation in the social, cultural, and party structures through which political elites are produced and positioned. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between descriptive representation, which concerns the presence of women within political institutions, and substantive representation, which concerns their capacity to exercise meaningful political roles, influence debates and decision-making, and articulate diverse social interests. Thus, a higher proportion of women in an elected institution may reflect

the procedural effectiveness of a quota mechanism, but it is not in itself sufficient to demonstrate a profound transformation in the structure of political power.

This issue can be approached through Pierre Bourdieu's conception of the political field as a space of competition over resources, positions, and political and symbolic capital, where actors' opportunities are determined not simply by their possession of the right to participate, but also by the resources, relationships, social networks, and capacity for acquiring political legitimacy at their disposal. Women's entry into the political field therefore does not take place within a neutral space; rather, it occurs within institutional, party, and social structures with their own histories, unwritten rules, and mechanisms of selection, advancement, and reproduction of elites. Consequently, studying women's political participation requires moving beyond the question of whether women have entered elected institutions toward deeper questions concerning how they enter, who nominates them, where they are positioned on electoral lists, what resources they possess, and to what extent they can transform an electoral seat into sustainable political capital.

Algeria during the period from 2012 to 2026 provides a particularly rich sociopolitical case for analysis. The year 2012 constituted an important institutional milestone with the enactment of Organic Law No. 12-03 of 12 January 2012, which established mechanisms for expanding women's representation in elected councils and set minimum proportions for women on candidate lists, with variations according to the type of institution and the number of seats being contested. These provisions covered elections to the National People's Assembly, the People's Provincial Assemblies, and, under specified conditions, the People's Municipal Assemblies. The law also stipulated that seats resulting from the prescribed proportions were allocated to female candidates according to their nominal order on the winning lists. This legal framework enabled women's representation in the National People's Assembly to reach a level unprecedented in the recent history of Algerian parliamentary representation. In 2012, approximately 146 women were elected, representing 31.6% of the members of the National People's Assembly, according to Inter-Parliamentary Union data.

However, this quantitative increase did not follow a continuously upward trajectory. Women's representation in the National People's Assembly declined to 119 women, or 25.8%, following the 2017 elections, before falling to only 33 women, or 8.1%, following the 2021 elections. This trajectory reveals a paradox worthy of analysis: the existence of a legal mechanism designed to increase representation does not necessarily lead to the construction of stable and sustainable women's political presence beyond the conditions provided by institutional protection. More importantly, historical data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union indicate that women's representation stood at 26% at the end of 2020, before settling at 8.1% following the 2021 elections. This makes comparison between the two periods essential for understanding the relationship between the legal design of the electoral system and its representational outcomes.

The significance of this trajectory becomes even more apparent when considering 2026. Inter-Parliamentary Union data indicate that, in July 2026, 25 women held seats out of a total of 407 members of the National People's Assembly, representing 6.1%. This figure should not be interpreted merely as a statistical decline; rather, it calls for an examination of the changes that have affected electoral rules, the nature of candidacy, mechanisms for forming electoral lists, the role of political parties, the resources available to female candidates, and the social and cultural factors that may influence access to elected institutions. Accordingly, the period 2012–2026 does not merely represent a succession of electoral outcomes; it constitutes an analytical trajectory through which the phase of rising women's representation can be compared with the subsequent phase of decline, while examining the conditions that rendered previous numerical gains unstable.

From this perspective, the expression “Quota Numbers”, used in the title of this study, has an analytical meaning. It does not deny the importance of quotas or minimize their role in opening political opportunities for women; rather, it points to the possibility of a gap between an increase in the number of women within institutions and the transformation of that numerical presence into meaningful and sustainable political influence. Electoral quotas may provide an institutional entry point for correcting representational imbalances, but they cannot by themselves transform all the conditions that produce political inequality, particularly when the selection and ranking of candidates remain connected to party structures, networks of influence, and political and social resources. Within this study, “representation paralysis” is therefore used as an operational analytical concept referring to a situation in which women's presence within political institutions becomes relatively disconnected from their ability to transform that presence into political influence and effective representation. It is not intended as a predetermined judgment on all women's experiences within elected institutions.

The issue is not confined to parliament but extends, in a more complex manner, to local elected councils, both municipal and provincial, as these represent the level closest to society and to the everyday interests of citizens. Local councils constitute an important arena for acquiring political experience, producing local leaders, and developing networks and relationships that may subsequently serve as resources for moving to the national level. Local politics is also more directly connected to immediate social structures, family and kinship ties, territorial relations, and networks of trust, solidarity, and interest. This makes the study of women's participation at the local level essential for understanding the trajectory that precedes entry into parliament. Organic Law No. 12-03 incorporated these levels into the mechanism for expanding women's representation by establishing proportions for women in certain candidacy arrangements for People's Provincial Assemblies and People's Municipal Assemblies, in addition to the National People's Assembly.

The local level is also important because women may encounter forms of constraint that differ from those experienced at the parliamentary level. Proximity to the social environment may facilitate the construction of trust and local legitimacy,

but it may simultaneously generate social, cultural, and network-based pressures affecting decisions to run for office and opportunities to obtain prominent positions on electoral lists. Local participation also provides a more precise understanding of the relationship between formal politics and social politics, because a female candidate does not enter the political field as an isolated individual. Rather, she enters as a social actor whose experience intersects with local, professional, familial, partisan, and territorial affiliations. Consequently, studying women in local elected councils helps reveal the mechanisms through which political elites are reproduced at the grassroots level.

A research gap therefore emerges from the fact that a focus on parliamentary indicators, although important, does not by itself provide a comprehensive picture of the trajectory of Algerian women's political participation. Parliamentary approaches often focus on the number of elected women and Algeria's position in international indicators, whereas the phenomenon requires these indicators to be connected to the local level, legislative transformations, party structures, mechanisms for forming electoral lists, and the nature of political and social resources available to women. This study consequently seeks to combine the national and local levels, as well as the quantitative analysis of women's presence with a qualitative analysis of the conditions underlying that presence. This makes it possible to move from the question of percentages to the question of the mechanisms that produce those percentages and explain their increase or decline.

The period 2012–2026 also makes it possible to construct a temporal analysis that goes beyond a snapshot approach. It allows the identification of a phase characterized by the introduction of institutional mechanisms to enhance women's representation, followed by an examination of their outcomes in subsequent elections, culminating in the decline recorded in 2021 and the continued decrease in parliamentary representation through 2026. This temporal perspective is sociologically significant because it allows the sustainability of affirmative institutional measures to be assessed and makes it possible to distinguish between temporary gains generated by legal rules and structural transformations that persist after those rules change. Legal empowerment can open the door to participation, but it does not by itself guarantee that participation will develop into a sustainable political and professional trajectory for women.

Against this background, the study addresses the following central research question: To what extent have quota mechanisms and legal measures adopted since 2012 contributed to building sustainable and effective women's political representation in Algeria, and what sociological and institutional factors explain the gap between the increase in women's numerical representation during the 2012–2017 period and the sharp decline following the 2021 elections and continuing through 2026, and how does this gap differ between parliament and local elected councils?

This central question gives rise to several subsidiary questions: What legal and institutional transformations have shaped the representation of Algerian women in elected councils during the period 2012–2026? To what extent has the quota mechanism succeeded in overcoming traditional barriers to women's candidacy and access to decision-making positions? What is the difference between merely including women on electoral lists and their actual access to elected seats? What role do candidate ranking within lists, electoral mechanisms, and political parties play in explaining variations in outcomes? How does women's participation in municipal and provincial elected councils compare with their representation in the National People's Assembly? What social, cultural, partisan, and network-based factors may constrain the sustainability of women's representation? Does the post-2021 decline reflect weaknesses in the legal mechanism alone, or does it reveal deeper structures underlying the reproduction of political elites? Finally, to what extent can subsequent institutional amendments and measures address the gap between numerical representation and effective representation?

The significance of this study lies, first, in its treatment of women's participation as a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a numerical indicator; it brings together law, politics, society, culture, and institutions. Second, it adopts a temporal perspective spanning approximately a decade and a half, allowing the continuity, interruption, and transformation of women's representation to be traced. Third, it places parliament and local elected councils within a single analytical framework rather than treating them as separate fields, given the potential relationship between local politics and the accumulation of political capital among women leaders. Fourth, it seeks to unpack the gap between legal equality and substantive equality in access to power. This gap cannot be explained by legislative provisions alone; rather, it requires an analysis of the structure of the political field and the conditions governing entry into and continued participation within it.

Methodologically, the study adopts a comparative descriptive-analytical approach to examine the trajectory of women's representation during the period 2012–2026. This approach combines analysis of legal and regulatory texts, examination of official electoral indicators, comparison of women's representation across different electoral periods, and the use of data issued by national institutions and specialized international bodies, particularly the Inter-Parliamentary Union, alongside relevant sociological and political literature on political representation, electoral quotas, and women's participation. The analysis does not merely describe percentages; rather, it treats them as indicators that contribute to explaining transformations and relating them to the institutional, social, and political structures that produced them.

Accordingly, the study is based on a central analytical hypothesis: increasing the proportion of women in elected institutions does not automatically produce a sustainable transformation in the structure of political representation. The sustainability of participation requires, alongside legislative intervention, a transformation in the conditions of candidacy, party selection, political-capital formation, and the development of local political experience, as well as addressing social, cultural, and institutional barriers that may prevent women from moving from the position of a “quota beneficiary” to that of an “independent political actor capable of generating influence and effective representation.” Thus, the analysis of the

Algerian trajectory between 2012 and 2026 does not seek to judge quotas as simply successful or unsuccessful; rather, it aims to understand their limits and the conditions under which they can be effective, while examining how the legal instrument interacts with the structures of society, the state, political parties, and elected councils to produce or constrain women's opportunities for political participation.

## **I. Methodological and Conceptual Framework**

### **1. Descriptive and Substantive Representation: When Numbers Are Not Enough**

The analysis of women's political participation in this study begins with Hanna Pitkin's distinction between descriptive representation and substantive representation. Descriptive representation primarily refers to the degree of similarity between the representative body and the social body it is expected to represent, in terms of gender, age, social affiliations, and other characteristics. Substantive representation, by contrast, relates to the political action exercised by representatives, namely the extent to which they express and defend the interests of the groups they represent and contribute to shaping public policies and decisions (Pitkin, 1967). This distinction is particularly important when examining women's political participation because an increase in the number of women within elected institutions does not necessarily imply a corresponding transformation in the substance of political practice or in the nature of power relations within the institution.

Accordingly, this study does not regard an increase in the proportion of women in parliament or local elected councils as conclusive evidence that political equality has been achieved. Rather, it considers such an increase as an initial indicator of expanded access to political institutions. The presence of women in an elected council represents an important transformation in the representational structure, but it remains distinct from possessing the capacity to initiate action, exert influence, participate in setting the political agenda, or affect decision-making processes. Women may be represented numerically while remaining constrained in terms of access to leadership positions, influential committees, or decision-making networks. They may also be present within an institution without their presence being accompanied by a transformation in the rules governing the production of decisions.

The distinction between "presence" and "effectiveness" therefore becomes a central entry point for understanding the Algerian trajectory between 2012 and 2026. Women's representation in the National People's Assembly reached 31.6% following the 2012 elections, before declining to 25.8% in 2017 and to 8.1% following the 2021 elections, while Inter-Parliamentary Union data recorded 6.1% in July 2026. These figures reveal substantial changes in women's descriptive representation, but they cannot, on their own, determine the extent to which women represent interests or exercise political influence. The study therefore distinguishes between the quantitative indicator of participation and the conditions required to transform this indicator into sustainable political practice.

Accordingly, the central question is no longer simply: How many women have reached parliament or local elected councils? Rather, it becomes: What conditions enable women to transform institutional access into an effective capacity for representation and influence? This shift from the question of numbers to the question of effectiveness makes it possible to move beyond a purely statistical reading of the phenomenon and to link women's representation to party structures, electoral rules, candidate ranking, relational networks, political and symbolic resources, and the prevailing political culture.

### **2. Quotas between the "Fast Track" and the Limits of Institutional Inclusion**

Electoral quotas constitute one of the most prominent affirmative-action mechanisms developed by political systems to address imbalances in representation between women and men. These mechanisms take various forms, including reserved seats for women, candidate quotas requiring a minimum proportion of women on electoral lists, and outcome quotas guaranteeing a specified number or proportion of seats after the results are announced. Comparative scholarship suggests that the effectiveness of such mechanisms depends not only on their legal existence, but also on their design, degree of enforceability, the nature of the electoral system, candidate-ranking mechanisms, and the sanctions applicable in cases of non-compliance.

In Algeria, Organic Law No. 12-03 of 12 January 2012 represented an important turning point, as it established minimum levels of women's presence on candidate lists according to the number of seats contested. At the level of the National People's Assembly, the percentages ranged from 20% to 40%, depending on the size of the electoral district, and reached 50% for constituencies representing the national community abroad. The law also established quotas for People's Provincial Assemblies and certain People's Municipal Assemblies. More importantly, Article 3 provided for the allocation of seats resulting from these quotas to female candidates according to their nominal order on the winning lists.

These provisions make it possible to reassess the 2012 experience more precisely. The problem was not simply the absence of any rule governing the ordering of women candidates, but rather the nature of the quota itself, the limits of its coverage, and the mechanism through which women's presence on a list was converted into an elected seat. The law guaranteed a minimum level of women's presence at the candidacy stage, but this did not mean that every woman included on a list would reach the elected council, since final access remained dependent on the number of seats won by the list, the ranking of candidates within it, and the mechanisms for allocating seats. The study of quotas should therefore distinguish between three successive stages: the inclusion of women on the list, the list's attainment of seats, and the conversion of a woman's position on the list into an elected seat.

These stages become even more significant when compared with the 2021 elections, which witnessed a change in the electoral system toward proportional representation through open lists, replacing the closed-list system previously used.

At the same time, not all measures relating to women's representation disappeared. Article 191 of Organic Law No. 21-01 required lists to observe parity between women and men in order to be accepted, alongside other requirements concerning young candidates and educational qualifications. Nevertheless, the 2021 elections revealed a substantial gap between women's presence at the candidacy stage and their presence in the final outcome: women accounted for 36.82% of more than 22,000 candidates, while elected women represented only 8.11% of the members of the National People's Assembly.

This highlights the importance of the concept of the "representational gap", which this study employs to analyze the Algerian experience. The gap does not refer solely to the low number of elected women; rather, it denotes the distance between the different stages of the political process: between the legal right to stand for election, the ability to obtain a favorable position on an electoral list, the capacity to attract votes, access to a seat, and, ultimately, the exercise of political influence within the institution. Accordingly, the decline in representation after 2021 cannot automatically be explained by the abolition of quotas, since the new legal framework continued to include a requirement concerning parity on electoral lists. Instead, it should be analyzed through the interaction between quota design, the open-list system, voter behavior, party candidate selection, candidate ranking, and electoral resources.

This approach helps avoid a single-factor explanation that attributes every increase or decline in women's representation to one legal variable. Quotas can serve as a tool for opening political space, but they do not necessarily, by themselves, generate women's political capital capable of being sustained over time. The central challenge, therefore, lies not merely in including women on electoral lists, but in moving from numerical inclusion to sustainable political inclusion.

### **3. The Sociological Approach: Political Field, Capital, and Domination**

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the political field makes it possible to move from a legal and institutional analysis toward an examination of the social relations through which political representation is produced. The political field is not a neutral space in which all actors compete under identical conditions. Rather, it is a field governed by specific rules that requires access to different forms of capital, particularly political, social, and symbolic capital. From this perspective, the legal right to stand for election does not necessarily translate into an actual capacity to access power, because actors enter political competition with unequal resources in terms of relationships, networks, experience, recognition, and mobilization capacity.

This approach is particularly relevant to women because their entry into the political field does not occur in a social vacuum. Rather, it takes place within a field historically dominated by organizational and leadership patterns characterized by a strong male presence. Consequently, increasing the number of women within elected councils may alter the visible structure of the institution without necessarily transforming the rules governing the distribution of political capital within it. A woman may obtain an elected seat through an institutional mechanism, yet still need to build networks of relationships, political experience, and symbolic legitimacy that enable her to transform that seat into an effective position within the political field.

The concept of symbolic violence can therefore be employed to understand certain mechanisms of indirect exclusion. Political exclusion is not always exercised through legal prohibition or explicit deprivation of participation. It may also appear through stereotypes, social classifications, and preconceived judgments concerning women's suitability for political activity. Media and social discourses that diminish the value of women legislators' presence are relevant in this context because they may do more than evaluate individual women; they can contribute to producing a broader image in which women's presence in politics becomes an object of doubt or ridicule. The study should therefore distinguish between legitimate political criticism of performance and discourse that turns the gender of a political actor into a criterion for judging that actor.

Symbolic domination is not confined to parliament; it may be more complex at the local level, where politics intersects with social, familial, and territorial ties. Local elected councils do not operate in an institutional space detached from society. Rather, they reflect, to a considerable extent, networks of relationships, trust, solidarity, and interests formed within the local environment. Social capital consequently becomes an important element in explaining opportunities for candidacy, obtaining support, and maintaining political activity. These resources may intersect with gender in ways that enable some women to access the political field more easily than others. This justifies moving from studying "women" as a homogeneous category toward examining inequalities within women's political experiences themselves.

### **4. Patriarchy and Social Networks: From the Family Sphere to the Political Sphere**

Approaches to patriarchy help explain the persistence of certain forms of inequality even in contexts where legal equality is recognized. However, the concept of patriarchy should not be transformed into a comprehensive or deterministic explanation of the Algerian case. Rather, it should be treated as a framework for analyzing how gender roles may intersect with the institutions of family, political parties, and local communities. Women may possess the legal right to stand for election and vote, while simultaneously facing social expectations associated with family roles, constraints related to time and mobility, or difficulties in developing the political networks required for electoral activity.

At the local level in particular, kinship ties, family relationships, and networks of personal acquaintance may play a role in determining political actors' opportunities. Nevertheless, it is important not to assume in advance that every local vote is a kinship-based or clientelistic vote. Instead, these factors should be treated as potential explanatory variables that interact with party affiliations, political programs, interests, and political experience. Electoral behavior is a complex process that cannot be reduced to a single factor.

This highlights the distinction between the social network as a political resource and clientelism as a specific political practice. Possessing a network of relationships does not necessarily imply an unlawful or undemocratic practice; politics at different levels requires trust, communication, and mobilization. However, when personal or kinship relationships become a substitute for competition based on programs and competence, they may affect the opportunities available to groups that do not possess comparable resources. From this perspective, women can be studied as actors entering a political field in which networks and power balances already exist prior to their entry.

### **5. Intersectionality: Women Are Not a Homogeneous Social Category**

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality requires moving beyond the treatment of "women" as a single homogeneous group toward an analysis of women's multiple positions within the social structure. Women's political experiences may differ according to social class, geographical location, age, educational level, occupation, party affiliation, and previous political experience. Therefore, an increase in the proportion of women within an institution does not mean that all women benefit from representation to the same extent.

This approach is particularly important in Algeria given territorial inequalities between cities and rural areas, as well as between urban centers and peripheral regions, in addition to differences in the educational, economic, and social resources available to women. A woman with higher education, professional experience, and extensive political networks may have substantially different opportunities from a woman entering local politics for the first time without comparable network or party resources. Consequently, the question should not be limited to "How many women entered the council?" but should also ask: "Which women entered, from which social positions, and with what resources?"

This approach can deepen the comparative analysis between parliament and local elected councils. Parliamentary politics requires broader national, party, and electoral resources, whereas local politics may depend more heavily on direct acquaintance, social networks, and local reputation. This does not mean that one level is categorically more open than the other; rather, it indicates that the forms of political capital required may differ between the two levels, which in turn affects women's opportunities for access and continuity.

### **6. Political Culture and Voter Behavior: Between Recognition of Participation and the Reproduction of Inequality**

Women's political representation cannot be understood independently of the political culture that shapes citizens' perceptions of authority, leadership, women, and men. Attitudes toward women in politics are not produced by laws alone. They are formed within the family, school, media, political parties, and local communities, and are influenced by perceptions of social roles, leadership, competence, and legitimacy.

Comparative literature on political culture indicates that attitudes toward women's political participation can affect both the electoral supply and electoral demand. Political parties may hesitate to nominate female candidates if they believe that their electoral prospects are limited, while voters may themselves be influenced by stereotypes, personal trust, or political and social affiliations. An interactive cycle may therefore emerge: parties' perceptions of voters may influence candidate selection, while voters' perceptions of candidates may, in turn, be shaped by party, media, and social messages. In Algeria, this issue is particularly significant at the local level, where personal acquaintance, local reputation, family and territorial affiliation may intersect with political and programmatic considerations. However, a scientific approach to this phenomenon requires avoiding generalizations about all voters or reducing Algerian electoral behavior to kinship and personal interests. Voting may result from the interaction of several considerations, including political affiliation, trust in the candidate, previous experience, electoral programs, local interests, and social ties.

Political culture should therefore not be understood here as a fixed "cultural barrier" to women, but rather as a changing structure of perceptions and practices that may evolve through education, urbanization, political experience, generational change, communication technologies, and broader social transformations. This opens the way to understanding women's participation as a dynamic process that does not stop at legal reform but requires gradual changes in the very criteria through which political legitimacy is constructed.

### **7. From Numerical Representation to Effective Representation: The Analytical Model of the Study**

On the basis of the preceding discussion, the study adopts an analytical model comprising four interconnected levels. The first level is the legal and institutional framework, including quota rules, candidacy requirements, the electoral system, and seat-allocation mechanisms. The second level consists of intermediary institutions, particularly political parties, electoral lists, and networks of candidate selection and mobilization. The third level concerns the social and cultural structure, including gender perceptions, familial and territorial networks, political trust, and social resources. The fourth level concerns practice within the elected institution, namely women's ability to participate in committees, deliberations, initiatives, decision-making, and the accumulation of political capital.

Within this framework, the quota is not treated as a variable capable of independently explaining increases or declines in women's representation. Rather, it is understood as an institutional mechanism that interacts with a range of mediating and structural variables. The analytical trajectory of the study can therefore be represented as follows:

Legal and electoral rules → opportunities for candidacy → selection and ranking of female candidates → electoral competition → access to the institution → practice and influence → accumulation of political capital and sustainability.

This sequence makes it possible to explain the paradox underlying the article: quotas produced a marked increase in women's descriptive representation, as occurred in the 2012 elections, but sustaining this presence requires additional conditions that extend beyond the legal text. Conversely, the decline in representation following the change in the electoral system in 2021 should not automatically be interpreted as a direct consequence of the abolition of quotas, since the legal

framework continued to require parity on electoral lists, while the results revealed a wide gap between women's proportion among candidates and their proportion among those elected.

Accordingly, the concept of "Representation Paralysis" used in this study does not denote the absence of women from political institutions. Rather, it constitutes an analytical concept describing a potential condition of disconnection between numerical representation and effective, sustainable representation. This concept makes it possible to combine the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of political participation and to examine whether the increase in the number of women has actually been accompanied by a redistribution of political and symbolic capital within institutions, or whether the transformation has remained confined to the numerical structure of representation.

The conceptual framework thus moves beyond a simple dichotomy between the "presence" and "absence" of women toward a more complex analysis based on three interconnected stages: access, representation, and influence. Access concerns women's ability to enter the political field; representation concerns their presence within elected institutions; and influence concerns their ability to exercise a political role that extends beyond merely occupying a seat. These three stages provide the basis for understanding the Algerian trajectory between 2012 and 2026 and for determining whether the transformations in women's representation reflect a structural transformation of the political field or a limited institutional response that has remained closely tied to changing electoral rules.

## **II. Historical Context — From Resistance to Conditional Citizenship (1944–2011)**

Women's political participation in Algeria since 2012 cannot be understood independently of the long historical trajectory through which women's citizenship was constituted. Women's political participation did not emerge with the introduction of electoral quota mechanisms; rather, it resulted from a gradual process through which women moved from a highly restricted legal and political status during the colonial period, to participation in the national movement and the War of Liberation, and subsequently to recognition as full citizens following independence. Yet this recognition was accompanied by institutional and social constraints that prevented legal equality from being fully translated into substantive equality in access to positions of decision-making. Accordingly, the period 2012–2026 represents a relatively late stage in a broader trajectory concerning the formation of Algerian women's political citizenship and the redefinition of their position within the state and society.

### **1. Political Citizenship in the Colonial Context: An Unequal Legal Right**

The development of Algerian women's rights to vote and stand for election during the colonial period was closely linked to the legal and political structure that differentiated among population groups according to legal status and religious affiliation. Inter-Parliamentary Union data indicate that 1944 marked the beginning of limited recognition of women's political rights in Algeria, but this recognition was restricted and did not extend to Muslim women. In 1958, an important transition occurred when the right was extended to Muslim women, before voting rights became universal with independence in 1962. The same data indicate that the right to stand for election likewise evolved from a restricted status toward general recognition at independence.

This development should not be viewed merely as a technical sequence of electoral reforms, because it reveals the very nature of citizenship within the colonial context. The differentiation between women on the basis of legal and religious status demonstrates that "women" did not constitute a homogeneous political category within the colonial system, and that the acquisition of political rights was linked more closely to the colonial structure of citizenship than to an abstract principle of equality. From this perspective, the history of Algerian women's voting rights shows that political citizenship was not granted all at once, but developed through successive stages characterized by restriction, expansion, and the redefinition of the categories entitled to participate in the political sphere.

This historical fact becomes even more significant when connected to the national trajectory. Algerian women were not merely subjects of colonial policies concerning political rights; they also became actors in the national movement and in various forms of resistance to colonial rule. Their involvement made the question of women part of the broader struggle over the definition of the nation, membership within it, and the position of individuals within the political community.

### **2. Women in the National Movement and the War of Liberation: From Objects of Liberation to Agents of Liberation**

The national movement and the War of Liberation represented a central stage in reshaping the image of Algerian women within the public sphere. Women participated in the revolution in multiple ways, including logistical support, clandestine activities, message delivery, provision of shelter and information, participation in organizational networks, and, in some cases, armed activities. This presence contributed to transforming the image of women from actors confined to the private sphere into actors capable of undertaking roles within the broader national public sphere.

The significance of this participation, however, lies not merely in its scale or diversity, but also in the paradox that would subsequently emerge between participation in the moment of liberation and participation in state institutions after liberation. The revolutionary experience demonstrated women's capacity to perform political and social roles that transcended the traditional division between the public and private spheres. Yet the transition from national mobilization to the construction of an independent state reorganized roles and positions according to a different institutional logic.

Here lies one of the central problems in the political history of Algerian women: participation in national resistance does not automatically produce sustainable equality in the distribution of power after independence. In other words, women may become central actors during an exceptional historical moment and subsequently find themselves confronted with a new institutional structure that redistributes decision-making positions according to different rules. Studying women's

participation after independence therefore requires distinguishing between the legitimacy derived from participation in the national struggle and the capacity to transform that legitimacy into enduring political and institutional capital.

### **3. Independence and State-Building: Legal Recognition and the Limits of Institutional Transformation**

With independence in 1962, women's political participation became part of general national citizenship. Inter-Parliamentary Union data indicate that the first Algerian woman entered parliament as part of the first post-independence legislature, while women's representation in the National People's Assembly elected in 1962 reached approximately 5.1%.

This early figure reveals a foundational paradox: the independent state recognized women as citizens possessing political rights, but legal recognition did not immediately translate into representation proportionate to women's social and demographic weight. Women's political participation remained relatively limited during the first decades after independence. Inter-Parliamentary Union data show variations in women's representation in the National People's Assembly across different elections, with low levels recorded at several points, including 1.4% in 1964, 3.8% in 1977, 1.4% in 1982, and 2.4% in 1987.

This does not mean that the Algerian state failed to recognize the principle of equality. Rather, it illustrates the difference between legal citizenship and practiced political citizenship. The presence of women in legal texts as full citizens does not necessarily mean that the conditions for accessing positions of power are distributed equally. An analysis of political institutions, political parties, and elite networks therefore becomes necessary to understand the gap between formal recognition of equality and actual representation.

### **4. The Family Code and the Question of Social Citizenship: When Spheres of Equality Diverge**

The year 1984 represents an important milestone in the study of the status of Algerian women, not because it directly concerned elections, but because it revealed tensions between recognition of women as political citizens and the persistence of legal and social rules defining their position within the family and society. The Family Code was enacted in 1984 and subsequently underwent significant amendments in 2005. Legal and social scholarship indicates that the Family Code remained an arena of contestation over the meaning of equality and women's rights, and that the 2005 amendments introduced reforms in several areas while not eliminating all forms of inequality identified by women's movements.

From a sociological perspective, the significance of this issue lies in the fact that political participation is not shaped within parliament alone. It is also influenced by women's position within the family, workplace, education system, and public sphere. An analysis of political citizenship therefore requires attention to the interrelationship between legal citizenship, social citizenship, and political citizenship. As long as certain social roles remain structured according to traditional conceptions of gender, women may encounter indirect constraints in developing political careers, even when electoral laws are formally egalitarian.

Studies of the Algerian Family Code have described this tension between recognition of citizenship and equality on the one hand, and the persistence of certain traditional legal and social conceptions on the other. Zahia Smail Salhi, for example, points to the continuing struggle surrounding the Family Code, patriarchal values, and women's position within society as an important dimension in the trajectory toward full citizenship for Algerian women.

Accordingly, the concept of "conditional citizenship" used in the title of this section does not imply an absence of legal citizenship. Rather, it is used analytically to refer to the distance between the formal recognition of rights and the social and institutional conditions that determine women's ability to exercise those rights equally and sustainably.

### **5. Political Pluralism and Democratic Transformation: Expanding the Political Sphere without a Fundamental Shift in the Structure of Representation**

The political transformation experienced by Algeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s reshaped the political field and opened space for multiparty and electoral pluralism. This opening was expected to provide broader opportunities for women's participation, yet the expansion of the electoral sphere did not automatically produce a substantial increase in women's representation.

Parliamentary data indicate that women's presence remained limited during much of this period. Women accounted for 6.2% of the National People's Assembly in 2002, 7.7% in 2007, and 6.2% in 2011. In the 2007 elections, 30 women were elected out of a total of 389 members, representing 7.71%.

These indicators are important because they provide an appropriate baseline for understanding the substantial increase that occurred in 2012. Before the introduction of quota mechanisms, low women's representation was not merely a temporary phenomenon; rather, it formed part of a relatively stable pattern. The 2012 reform can therefore be viewed as an institutional intervention in a representational trajectory that had been developing at a very slow pace.

### **6. From the Representation Crisis to the Search for Corrective Mechanisms**

During the 1990s, Algeria experienced a highly complex political and security period that affected political and party institutions as well as the public sphere more generally. Under such circumstances, women's political participation could not be separated from the broader crisis of legitimacy and the reorganization of the political field. However, the relationship between women-focused reforms and broader political legitimacy should be established cautiously, since public policies generally have multiple motivations and cannot be reduced to a single explanation without direct evidence. The decade preceding the 2012 reform coincided with growing international debate on the need to strengthen women's political representation, alongside the development of international and national frameworks relating to equality and non-

discrimination. In Algeria, this process became increasingly visible through the adoption of institutional measures aimed at increasing women's presence in elected councils.

The quota thus came to represent a transition from the principle of general legal equality to a corrective policy targeting representational outcomes. This shift is sociologically significant because it reflects an implicit recognition that formal equality in candidacy conditions is not always sufficient to produce substantive equality in outcomes. If women possess the same legal right to stand for election as men but do not reach institutions in proportions close to their share of the population, institutional intervention may be understood as an attempt to address this imbalance.

#### **7. 2011 as a Transitional Threshold toward “Quota Numbers”**

The year 2011 represents a key threshold in the trajectory leading to the 2012 reform. Before the adoption of quotas, women's representation in the National People's Assembly stood at only 6.2% in January 2011, according to Inter-Parliamentary Union data, compared with 31.6% following the 2012 elections.

This increase indicates that the change was not the result of a gradual evolution in electoral representation, but was associated with direct institutional intervention in the rules governing the formation of electoral lists and the production of seats. Consequently, 2012 constitutes a dividing line between two stages: a stage in which women's representation depended more heavily on conventional mechanisms of political competition, and a stage in which the law intervened more directly to guarantee a minimum level of women's presence.

The importance of this transformation does not mean, however, that quotas eliminated the obstacles facing women. Rather, they reconfigured one of the conditions governing entry into the political field. Women gained greater institutional opportunities to appear on electoral lists and enter elected councils, but the more important questions concerned what happened after access: Did the numerical increase translate into accumulated political experience? Did it generate women's networks capable of ensuring continuity? Did women move from legally reserved or protected seats toward independent political competition? And did increased presence contribute to reshaping political culture toward women? These questions make the period following 2012 more significant than merely a phase of numerical growth. It provides an opportunity to assess whether quotas produced a cumulative trajectory of women's representation or whether they generated a numerical increase that remained dependent on specific institutional rules.

#### **8. The Historical Outcome: From Legal Citizenship to the Question of Substantive Representation**

The historical analysis covering the period from 1944 to 2011 reveals three interconnected stages in the trajectory of Algerian women's political participation. The first was the stage of restricted political rights during the colonial period, when recognition of women's rights varied according to legal and religious status until voting rights became universal with independence. The second was the stage of legal citizenship after 1962, when women became part of the national political community, while their presence in representative institutions remained limited. The third was the stage of seeking institutional correction that preceded the 2012 reform, after electoral experience demonstrated that legal equality alone was insufficient to raise women's level of representation.

Accordingly, the transition to quotas in 2012 should not be understood as the beginning of Algerian women's political participation, but rather as a new stage in the historical attempt to transform political citizenship from a legal right into broader institutional representation. This clarifies the importance of the period beginning in 2012 in the present study, as it makes it possible to test a fundamental question: Can a legal mechanism produce a sustainable transformation in the political field, or does its impact remain dependent on the existence of the rule that protects representation?

This question leads directly to the next stage of the study, where it becomes necessary to move from the broader historical account to an analysis of the legal architecture of the Algerian quota system since 2012, the way it operates through electoral lists, and the comparison of its outcomes with the transformations that affected the electoral system after 2021. The preceding history explains the need for institutional intervention, whereas the subsequent period reveals the limits of that intervention and the conditions governing its effectiveness.

### **III. The 2012 Quota — Legal Engineering and Record Numbers**

The year 2012 represented a turning point in the history of women's political representation in Algeria, not only because of the substantial increase in the number of women within the National People's Assembly, but also because the state moved from relying solely on the general principle of legal equality toward adopting a corrective institutional mechanism aimed at addressing the imbalance in representation between men and women. This development took place within the framework of Organic Law No. 12-03 of 12 January 2012, concerning the procedures for expanding women's opportunities for representation in elected councils. The law explicitly linked the expansion of women's participation to the reorganization of candidacy requirements in parliamentary and local elections.

#### **1. The Legal Architecture of the Quota: From General Principle to Electoral Percentage**

In 2012, Algeria did not adopt a single quota percentage for all elections. Instead, it established a graduated system that took into account the number of seats contested and the nature of the elected body. In elections to the National People's Assembly, the law established a minimum of 20% when four seats were contested, 30% when the number of seats reached five or more, 35% when fourteen or more seats were contested, and 40% when the number reached thirty-two or more seats, while the percentage reached 50% for constituencies representing the national community abroad. For elections to People's Provincial Assemblies, the law established percentages ranging from 30% to 35% depending on the number of seats, while a 30% quota applied to People's Municipal Assemblies located in district headquarters and to municipalities with populations exceeding 20,000 inhabitants.

This legal architecture demonstrates that the legislator did not treat women's representation as a single homogeneous issue. Rather, it sought to link the proportion of women to the size of the electoral district. This reflects the assumption that opportunities for including larger numbers of women become more realistic in constituencies with a greater number of seats, whereas higher percentages may be more difficult to implement in smaller constituencies. The Algerian quota therefore initially emerged as a mechanism flexible in terms of percentages, but mandatory in principle.

The law did not merely establish percentages. It also linked compliance with these requirements to the acceptance of electoral lists and made seat allocation dependent on the number of votes obtained by each list, while allocating the prescribed proportions to female candidates according to their nominal order on winning lists. This point has considerable analytical significance because it means that the law did not stop at including women at the candidacy stage; it also sought to connect their presence on electoral lists to the possibility of translating the legal quota into actual seats when a list won. Accordingly, the analysis of the 2012 quota should not be reduced to the statement that it "imposed a percentage of women." Rather, it should be broken down into a sequence of stages: establishing the legal percentage, forming the list, accepting the list, ranking candidates, obtaining votes for the list, and converting candidate ranking into elected seats. The greater the distance between these stages, the less capable the legal percentage becomes of guaranteeing substantive representation.

## **2. The Quota as an Intervention in the Structure of Political Competition**

The significance of the 2012 reform lies in its direct intervention in one of the most important mechanisms through which political elites are reproduced: the selection of candidates. Before the adoption of quotas, women's access to parliament depended to a greater extent on the ability of parties and electoral lists to put forward female candidates capable of competing under the prevailing electoral conditions. The results of previous years had demonstrated the limitations of this pathway, as women accounted for only 6.2% of the National People's Assembly in 2011, compared with 7.7% in 2007.

Accordingly, the quota was not merely a statistical adjustment; it represented an attempt to reshape the mechanism through which the political elite is produced. Parties and electoral lists were required to identify a larger number of female candidates and place them in positions that could, if the list won, translate their legally mandated presence into representation within the Assembly. From a sociological perspective, this meant that the state intervened at a point that had previously been governed to a greater extent by traditional processes of partisan and political selection.

This intervention did not mean, however, that the state eliminated the other mechanisms involved in elite formation. Women entering electoral lists remained connected to parties, lists, and the social and political circles that provided them with legitimacy and resources. The quota can therefore be said to have changed the conditions of entry into the political field without necessarily reshaping the political field as a whole.

## **3. The 2012 Elections: A Historic Numerical Leap**

The results of this intervention became particularly evident in the legislative elections held in May 2012. The number of elected women increased to 146 out of 462 members, representing 31.6% of the National People's Assembly, compared with 6.2% at the beginning of 2011. This increase represented more than a gradual improvement; it constituted a rapid transition from limited representation to a level exceeding 30% within a single electoral cycle.

From a sociological perspective, this outcome demonstrates the power of institutional factors in reshaping the outcomes of representation. If the analysis relied solely on gradual changes in political culture or shifts in voters' attitudes, it would be difficult to explain the rapid transition from 24 women in 2011 to 146 women in 2012. The 2012 elections therefore constitute a clear case of the capacity of electoral engineering to generate rapid change in the numerical structure of an elected institution.

However, this quantitative achievement simultaneously raises a more complex question: Does the increase in the number of women represent a transformation in the structure of representation, or does it primarily constitute a successful application of the legal mechanism in achieving its numerical objective? The answer cannot be derived from the number of seats alone. It requires examining the backgrounds of female legislators, their political and partisan experience, their positions within the institution, their roles in committees, and the extent to which they gained access to positions of leadership and influence.

## **4. From 31.6% to 25.8%: The Emergence of the Model's Limits**

The level achieved in 2012 was not fully maintained in the following legislative elections. In the May 2017 elections, 119 women were elected out of 462 members, representing 25.8%. Although this percentage remained high compared with the pre-quota period, it represented a decline of approximately six percentage points from the 2012 level.

This result allows for a more balanced interpretation of the experience. The effect of the quota did not disappear after 2012, but neither did it maintain the record level achieved in the first election in which it was implemented. Women's representation in 2017 remained approximately three times higher than its pre-reform level, indicating that institutional intervention was capable of increasing participation but did not necessarily guarantee that the increase would remain at the same level.

This requires distinguishing between the direct effect of the quota and the cumulative effect of representational policy. The direct effect appears in the introduction of larger numbers of women into the institution, whereas a cumulative effect requires a political and partisan structure that enables these women to develop the experience, networks, and political capital necessary for continuity after changes in electoral rules.

### 5. The Sociological Paradox: When Numerical Success Becomes a Subject of Controversy

The substantial increase in the number of women following the 2012 elections generated public debate concerning the quality of women's representation, rather than merely its quantity. Media and political discourse included derogatory expressions such as "the hairdressers' parliament," referring to the election of some women whose previous occupations lay outside politics, including hairdressing. Media reports documented this expression and associated it with criticism of the quota experience and the alleged lack of political experience among some elected women.

However, a scholarly treatment of this phenomenon requires caution so as not to reproduce the stigma itself. A legislator's previous occupation cannot constitute a sufficient criterion for judging her political suitability. Democratic representation does not require all elected representatives to have prior political or academic careers. The relevant scholarly question is therefore not whether female legislators had "professions suitable for politics," but rather: What level of political experience did they possess, what resources did they bring into the institution, and what roles did they perform after election?

From a Bourdieusian perspective, this discourse can be interpreted as part of the struggle over symbolic legitimacy within the political field. A woman entering parliament through an institutional mechanism may encounter doubts concerning the legitimacy of her access, particularly when the conventional pathway to acquiring political capital has historically been structured around predominantly male forms of experience and networks. In such circumstances, discussion may shift from evaluating individual performance to generalizing judgments about an entire group of women.

A distinction should therefore be made between legitimate criticism of parliamentary performance and gender-based stigmatization. Society has the right to evaluate the performance of male and female legislators and hold them accountable for competence and legislative work. However, turning a female legislator's gender or previous occupation into a criterion in itself for assessing her suitability constitutes a different form of evaluation. This distinction helps explain how symbolic violence may operate within an institution that has legally opened its doors to women.

### 6. Did the Quota Produce Fragile Representation?

The 2012 experience demonstrates that increasing numbers does not necessarily amount to building an independent women's political base. The quota expands access, but it does not automatically create political experience, partisan networks, or capacity for influence. Subsequent analyses have suggested that some elected women entered parliament without prior political or civic experience, which contributed to the debate over the nature of the representation produced by the quota.

Methodologically, however, this observation should not be generalized to all female legislators. The absence of political experience among some elected women does not imply its absence among all of them, just as previous political experience is not the only criterion of a legislator's capacity to perform parliamentary functions. It is therefore more accurate to speak of variation in political resources and experience within the group of elected women.

This reveals one of the limitations of quotas: they can address the problem of the limited supply of female candidates on electoral lists, but they cannot, by themselves, address differences in experience, training, networks, and electoral resources. Consequently, if quotas are not accompanied by other policies relating to political training, capacity building, support for women's participation within political parties, and the creation of an institutional environment conducive to political and professional development, they may remain mechanisms for compensating for numerical imbalance rather than mechanisms for restructuring the political field.

### 7. Quotas and the Local Level: From Parliament to the Political Base

One of the important features of Organic Law No. 12-03 is that it did not limit intervention to the National People's Assembly. It also covered People's Provincial Assemblies and People's Municipal Assemblies according to specified percentages and conditions. This dimension is particularly important for analyzing women's political participation because local councils represent the level at which initial political experience is acquired, relationships with voters are developed, and the relationship between politics and local social structures becomes directly visible.

However, the effect of quotas at the local level cannot be assumed from parliamentary outcomes. The nature of local competition differs from parliamentary competition in terms of constituency size, relational networks, resources, the degree of direct familiarity with candidates, and the nature of the issues at stake. Moreover, the law itself did not impose the same percentage on all municipalities, but linked the quota to the municipality's status and population size. This makes local analysis more complex than simply applying the parliamentary indicator to the local level.

Local quotas should therefore be viewed as an attempt to establish **a social base for women's representation**, rather than merely as a means of increasing the number of women in parliament. If women are able to acquire experience in municipal and provincial councils, the local level may become a space for accumulating political capital, potentially increasing opportunities for later transition to the national level. This possibility, however, requires historical testing and local-level data and should not be assumed without evidence.

### 8. The Quota as a Corrective Mechanism Rather Than a Comprehensive Solution

The Algerian experience demonstrates that quotas had a clear effect on the numerical dimension of representation. The transition from 6.2% in 2011 to 31.6% in 2012 provides strong evidence of the capacity of legislative intervention to rapidly reshape the composition of the National People's Assembly. The proportion remained at 25.8% in 2017, substantially above pre-2012 levels.

These results do not mean, however, that quotas were capable by themselves of restructuring the political field. The law addressed a specific part of the problem: women's representation on electoral lists and in electoral outcomes. Other issues, including women's presence in party leadership, access to political and financial resources, development of electoral experience, political training, participation in influential committees, and access to leadership positions within institutions, extend beyond the direct scope of quotas.

The appropriate question, therefore, is not whether quotas "succeeded" or "failed" in absolute terms, but rather in which respects they were effective and where the limits of their effectiveness emerged. They were clearly effective in increasing numerical presence, while transforming this presence into sustainable and effective representation remained dependent on broader institutional, partisan, and social factors.

## 9. From "Quota Numbers" to the Test of Sustainability

The 2012 elections can be regarded as an initial test of quota effectiveness, while the 2017 elections constituted a second test of the sustainability of its effects. If the transition from 6.2% in 2011 to 31.6% in 2012 demonstrated the capacity of the law to change the numerical structure of the Assembly, the decline to 25.8% in 2017 showed that the increase was not linear. The sharper decline came in the 2021 elections, when women's representation fell to 8.1%, before Inter-Parliamentary Union data recorded 6.1% in July 2026.

Accordingly, the period 2012–2017 can be viewed as a phase of rise and relative consolidation, whereas 2021–2026 represents a phase of decline and renewed testing of the conditions of women's representation. This temporal comparison gives the concept of "Quota Numbers" its analytical value. The issue is not simply that the numbers increased, but whether this increase produced an institutional and social transformation capable of continuing after changes in electoral rules.

The 2012 experience thus reveals a fundamental paradox: the law was able to change the visible composition of parliament more rapidly than it was able to transform the structure of the political field itself. Women's presence became visible within the institution, but the persistence, expansion, and transformation of this presence into sustainable political capital remained dependent on conditions extending beyond the legal text.

The study therefore proceeds to the next stage, where analyzing the transformation of the electoral system after 2021 becomes necessary to understand the sharp decline in women's representation. The question is no longer merely whether quotas can raise the numbers, but whether the political system can sustain women's participation when the mechanisms through which representation is produced change.

## IV. Women in Local Elected Councils (2012–2021): Quantitative Presence and Limited Leadership

The People's Municipal Assemblies (APCs) and People's Provincial Assemblies (APWs) represented the broadest arena for testing the impact of the electoral reforms adopted in 2012, as the expansion of women's representation was not directed toward parliament alone but also encompassed local councils, باعتبارها the sphere closest to citizens' everyday lives and a key arena for producing political elites and developing electoral experience. The implementation of the quota system enabled a noticeable transition from limited female representation to a more visible presence within local elected structures. Comparative data on the outcomes of these reforms indicate that women's representation in the People's Provincial Assemblies increased from approximately 6.6% before the implementation of the quota to 29.7% in 2012, while representation in the People's Municipal Assemblies rose from approximately 9% to 16.5%. This reflects a direct effect of the legal mechanism in broadening the pool of female candidates and facilitating access to elected seats. An Algerian study of the 2012 and 2017 elections likewise concluded that the quota system contributed to increasing women's opportunities to stand for election and win membership in local councils (Aouaijia & Zouagri, 2021, pp. 553–570).

However, the increase in the number of women within local councils did not necessarily entail their transition into positions of effective political action at the local level. The Algerian experience reveals from the outset a gap between representation within the elected body and positioning within the hierarchy of local power. This paradox became particularly evident in the outcomes following 2012, as the numerical increase was not accompanied by a comparable increase in women's assumption of council presidencies or control over key decision-making spheres. A study published by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe indicated that the substantial increase in women's representation in provincial and municipal councils did not, at that time, result in any woman reaching the presidency of the council in which she had been elected. This illustrates that the transition from council membership to executive leadership constituted an institutional and political barrier distinct from the barrier of gaining an elected seat.

The comparison between the municipal and provincial levels reveals an important sociological dimension. Women's representation in provincial councils was higher than that in municipal councils. This difference may be explained, in part, by variations in the nature of the electoral arena, the size of constituencies, and the mechanisms through which electoral lists were formed, as well as by differences in the position of the provincial council within the political and administrative structure. Yet this disparity should not be reduced to the legal factor alone, because electoral representation is shaped at the intersection of the legal framework, political parties' capacity to select and rank female candidates, the political and social resources available to candidates, and the nature of local networks that influence electoral campaigning and the construction of electoral trust. Accordingly, quotas may open the door to electoral competition, but they do not, by themselves, guarantee access to the resources necessary to transform membership into sustainable political influence.

The significance of this observation becomes clearer when women within local councils are viewed as political actors rather than merely electoral figures. Membership in a council does not necessarily imply the capacity to set the agenda, lead committees, influence the distribution of local resources, or build the alliances required to form a majority. It is therefore possible to distinguish between two levels of participation: the first is institutional presence, represented by the number of women elected; the second is leadership and decision-making participation, referring to the extent to which women reach council presidencies, committee leadership, and positions of responsibility within elected structures. While quotas produced clear progress at the first level, the second remained more limited, making the study of the local experience essential for understanding the limits of women's representation in Algeria.

Data from 2021 confirm this paradox more precisely. According to the Ministry of the Interior, the total number of women elected to local councils following the 2021 elections reached 1,153, including 138 in the People's Provincial Assemblies and 1,015 in the People's Municipal Assemblies. The Ministry also reported that seven women served as presidents of People's Municipal Assemblies in 2021, out of a total of 1,541 municipalities. The juxtaposition of these two figures reveals a clear gap between numerical presence and access to the highest level of local leadership: women had become present within local councils in significant numbers, but access to the position of council president remained very limited. This does not mean that women were absent from all forms of local responsibility; the Ministry of the Interior also indicated their participation in executive bodies as deputy presidents and as heads of certain standing committees. This requires a distinction between the limited presence of women as council presidents and other forms of participation in local decision-making.

From the perspective of the sociology of political organization, this situation indicates that the main obstacle does not always arise at the stage of access to the institution, but may subsequently shift to the stage of the distribution of power within the institution. The presence of a larger number of women on a council may achieve descriptive representation of the population, but it does not automatically ensure that they possess the organizational or symbolic resources necessary to influence decisions. Here, the concept of political capital becomes particularly important. Previous experience, party networks, social relationships, negotiating capacity, media visibility, and financial and organizational resources can all shape an elected official's position within the council regardless of gender. When these resources are distributed unequally, an increase in women's numerical representation does not necessarily produce a parallel transformation in the structure of leadership.

The local arena also does not operate independently of the prevailing political culture. Municipal elections are strongly connected to relationships of proximity, trust, personal familiarity, and family and social ties, alongside party and programmatic affiliation. Nacer Djabi has addressed this dimension by highlighting the importance of proximity, interest, and direct personal acquaintance in explaining electoral behavior in Algeria. This suggests that local competition does not always take place solely on the basis of abstract political programs; rather, it is intertwined with multiple social and personal networks. From this perspective, women may find themselves required to build social and political capital in an arena where traditional networks, mobility, negotiating capacity, and access to local actors remain influential factors in determining electoral opportunities.

Nevertheless, this observation should not be transformed into an assumption that local voters categorically reject women politically, as such a conclusion would require comparative empirical evidence. Electoral data themselves demonstrate that women succeeded in entering local councils in greater numbers after 2012. Moreover, the continued presence of more than one thousand elected women in municipal councils in 2021 indicates that women's political participation had become part of the local electoral structure. Therefore, a more precise sociological interpretation does not consist in searching for a generalized "social rejection," but rather in analyzing the interaction between political culture, party institutions, kinship networks, electoral resources, list-formation mechanisms, and the conditions governing access to leadership positions.

The 2021 elections constitute an important turning point in this trajectory. The local elections were conducted under a new electoral system based on open-list proportional representation and preferential voting without panachage, representing a change in the way candidates were selected and positioned within the electoral process compared with the previous system. Consequently, caution is required when interpreting any subsequent change in women's representation as resulting solely from the "abolition of quotas." The transition to a different voting system reshaped the relationship between voters, lists, and candidates and altered the mechanisms of competition within electoral lists. Moreover, the Ministry of the Interior itself indicates that the 2020 reforms consolidated the principle of parity in local elected councils and introduced mechanisms to support women's participation, making the subsequent phase more complex than a simple narrative of legal discontinuity.

Accordingly, 2021 should not be regarded as the end of women's local political participation, but rather as a transition from a phase in which guaranteed presence was more strongly associated with the quota mechanism to a phase in which the challenge became more clearly connected to transforming presence into independent political competition and institutional leadership. This point is important for understanding the article's broader trajectory. While parliament displayed a sharp decline in women's representation after the 2021 elections, falling to 8.1% in the National People's Assembly compared with 25.8% in 2017, the local experience presents a different picture, and parliamentary indicators should therefore not be mechanically projected onto the local level.

Thus, the sociological assessment of the 2012–2021 period can be formulated through three interconnected findings. First, the quota produced a genuine institutional leap in integrating women into local elected councils. Second, this leap did not

translate to the same degree into local political leadership, as access to council presidencies remained extremely limited. Third, the sustainability of representation does not depend on electoral law alone; it also requires the accumulation of political experience, the expansion of women's social and organizational capital, stronger positions within political parties, and improved opportunities to access leadership positions within elected councils. The issue therefore moves from the question, "How many women were elected?" to a deeper question: What position do women occupy within the structure of local power after their election? This question provides the basis for analyzing the post-2021 phase, in which the relationship between electoral law, candidacy mechanisms, individual competition, and the sustainability of women's representation became increasingly complex.

#### **V. 2021 — The Reversal Point: From Guaranteed Numbers to Numerical Abstention**

The 2021 legislative elections represented a pivotal moment in the trajectory of Algerian women's political representation, not only because of the substantial decline in the number of women elected, but also because of the transformation in the relationship between the legal framework and the mechanisms governing access to parliamentary seats. The elections were held under Organic Law No. 21-01 of 10 March 2021, relating to the electoral system, which introduced open-list voting and preferential voting and reorganized the conditions for forming electoral lists in a manner different from the system that had governed the 2012 and 2017 elections. Under Article 191, the acceptance of candidate lists became subject to compliance with gender parity, with at least half of the list allocated to candidates under forty years of age and at least one-third to candidates with university-level education. Thus, the transformation did not constitute a simple abolition of the principle of women's representation; rather, it involved a transition from a quota system establishing electoral percentages according to constituency size to a new electoral architecture combining parity with other requirements while giving voters a greater role in selecting names within the list.

The sociological significance of this shift derives from the fact that it altered the nature of the institutional protection previously available to women. Under the 2012 system, the legal quota directly established a minimum threshold for women's representation according to the size of the electoral constituency, whereas competition in the 2021 elections became more closely associated with the individual candidate's performance within an open list. The question therefore shifted from "Is there a woman on the list?" to a more complex question: "Can a woman obtain enough preferential votes to move from candidacy to electoral victory?" This transformation restores the importance of the political, social, and symbolic resources possessed by candidates, such as local visibility, electoral experience, organizational networks, capacity to communicate with voters, and the candidate's position within the party organization or networks of independent candidates.

The paradox becomes particularly clear when the scale of women's candidacy is compared with electoral outcomes. In the 2021 elections for the National People's Assembly, there were 22,554 candidates, including 8,305 women, representing 36.8% of all candidates. Nevertheless, only 33 women were elected out of 407 seats, representing 8.1% of the Assembly's total membership. These figures reveal a widening gap between the stages of candidacy and representation. Women were not absent from the electoral arena in numerical terms, but their presence on electoral lists did not translate into parliamentary representation at the same level.

The significance of this outcome becomes even clearer when compared with previous elections. In 2012, 146 women were elected to the National People's Assembly out of 462 seats, representing 31.6%, followed by 119 women in 2017, representing 25.8%, before the number fell to only 33 women in 2021, representing 8.1%. The trajectory therefore does not represent merely a gradual decline; rather, it reveals an abrupt transition from a phase in which women's representation was relatively guaranteed by a strong legal mechanism to a phase in which electoral outcomes became more dependent on the nature of the electoral system and the mechanisms of ranking and voting within lists.

From a sociological perspective, this outcome should not be interpreted as evidence of declining women's willingness to participate in politics, since the high number of female candidates in 2021 contradicts such a simplified interpretation. The presence of more than eight thousand female candidates indicates the continued availability of a broad pool of women willing to enter political competition. The analytical question should therefore focus on the conditions under which candidacy is transformed into electoral victory—namely, political-party institutions, mechanisms of list formation, electoral resources, voting patterns, and disparities in political capital between male and female candidates. In this sense, the gap between 36.8% of female candidates and 8.1% of female parliamentarians demonstrates that the representation problem cannot be reduced to "too few women willing to enter politics"; rather, it should be analyzed as a problem involving multiple stages of the electoral process.

The adoption of open lists also added a new dimension to this issue. Under the previous system, the list played a major role in structuring opportunities to obtain seats, whereas under the new system voters acquired a greater capacity to influence the ranking of successful candidates through preferential voting. Theoretically, this may imply a transfer of part of the power from party leadership to voters, but at the same time it makes candidates' prospects more closely dependent on their possession of independent electoral resources. Social networks, mobilization capacity, local reach, political experience, and media visibility may consequently become more important in explaining electoral outcomes. These resources are not necessarily distributed equally between men and women, making it insufficient to study the electoral system separately from the structure of the political society in which it operates.

The decline in overall electoral participation is also important for understanding the political environment in which the 2021 elections took place. Legislative elections recorded a turnout rate of 43.14% in 2012, while turnout fell to

approximately 23.0% in 2021, according to Inter-Parliamentary Union data. This general decline constitutes an important contextual variable because it reflects a reduction in overall electoral participation; however, it does not by itself allow the conclusion that women specifically abstained from voting or that the decline in women's representation resulted directly from their attitude toward the elections. A more cautious sociological formulation is therefore to state that the 2021 elections took place in a context characterized by low overall electoral participation and a broader crisis of trust and representation. This context should be incorporated into the explanation of transformations in women's representation without treating it as a single causal factor.

Another paradox emerges here between protest participation and institutional participation during the period following the popular movement of 2019. The public sphere witnessed a notable presence of women through various forms of expression, protest, and civic participation, while the parliamentary representation achieved in 2021 was extremely limited compared with the level produced by the quota mechanism in 2012. Yet the transition from presence in the protest sphere to representation within elected institutions is not automatic. It requires organizations capable of transforming social mobilization into candidacies, then into electoral campaigns, and subsequently into votes and seats. The paradox therefore does not necessarily mean that women were present in the streets but absent from politics; rather, it reveals a distinction between different forms of political participation: protest and civic participation on the one hand, and electoral, partisan, and institutional participation on the other.

From this perspective, 2021 can be understood as a test of the capacity of women's representation to persist outside the previous mechanism of electoral protection. The result of 8.1% does not, by itself, demonstrate that women are incapable of competing, nor does it establish that the new system automatically excludes them. It does, however, clearly show that the transition from a quota-based system to one relying to a greater extent on competition within lists brought to the forefront factors whose effects had previously been mitigated by the quota. Consequently, analyzing political parties, political resources, mobilization networks, electoral culture, and voting patterns becomes essential for understanding why the gap between candidacy and electoral victory widened.

The importance of this analysis becomes even more evident when the parliamentary outcome is situated within the long-term trajectory of women's representation in Algeria. Historical data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union show a progression from 10 women in the National People's Assembly in 1962 to 30 in 2007, then to 146 in 2012, before declining to 119 in 2017 and 33 in 2021. The 2012 experience should therefore not be viewed merely as an exceptional figure, but rather as an institutional experience demonstrating the capacity of legislation to transform the structure of representation within a relatively short period. The 2021 experience, by contrast, revealed the limits of the sustainability of such transformation when the rules of competition changed.

Accordingly, the "reversal" observed in 2021 should not be reduced to the phrase "women's failure in elections," because such an interpretation shifts responsibility for the outcome onto women themselves while overlooking the institutional structure that shapes opportunities for competition. A more sociologically precise formulation is to speak of a reversal in numerical representation following a change in the mechanism that had guaranteed it. Women remained strongly present at the candidacy stage, but they did not obtain representation proportional to their presence on electoral lists. The analysis therefore moves to a deeper level: if quotas succeeded in increasing the number of women in parliament, why did this not generate, to the same extent, an accumulation of women's political capital capable of sustaining representation after the electoral rules changed?

This finding makes it possible to formulate a central explanatory hypothesis for the subsequent stages of the study: the more women's representation is dependent on a compensatory legal mechanism rather than on the independent accumulation of political and organizational capital, the more vulnerable that representation becomes to decline when the rules of political competition change. This is not a final conclusion, but rather an analytical hypothesis requiring further examination through comparison between parliament and local elected councils, analysis of women's positions within political parties and elected bodies, and investigation of the relationship between numerical presence and access to leadership and decision-making positions.

#### **VI. 2022–2026: Consolidating "Paralysis" and Symbolic Milestones**

The period extending from 2022 to 2026 reveals a new phase in the trajectory of Algerian women's political representation. Following the sharp decline recorded in the 2021 elections for the National People's Assembly, the subsequent years did not show strong quantitative indications of a return to the levels achieved under the quota system between 2012 and 2017. The question, therefore, is no longer limited to the decline that occurred in a particular election year, but also concerns the capacity of the political and electoral system to reproduce sustainable women's representation outside strong mechanisms of legal support. This period is particularly significant because it makes it possible to test whether the decline observed in 2021 was merely a temporary electoral circumstance or represented a more stable trend in the structure of political representation.

At the local level, elections for the People's Municipal Assemblies and People's Provincial Assemblies were held on 27 November 2021 in a context characterized by lower electoral participation than in the 2017 elections. This provided a less mobilized political environment for all groups, rather than for women alone. Accordingly, the limited presence of women should not be interpreted as a direct consequence of low electoral turnout, but rather as part of a broader context characterized by declining electoral participation and changing rules of competition. Within this environment, women's presence in local councils remained established, but it did not translate to a comparable presence in leadership positions.

The number of women who reached the presidencies of People's Municipal Assemblies remained extremely limited, with official data indicating only seven female presidents among 1,541 municipalities in 2021. This paradox between continued membership and limited access to the presidency reproduces the gap between **numerical representation and leadership representation** observed in earlier stages.

This situation demonstrates that the problem of women's political participation does not end when a seat is won. Even when a woman succeeds in entering an elected council, a second stage of competition begins, involving the distribution of positions, the formation of alliances, committee presidencies, and the capacity to influence the local agenda. Thus, an increase in the number of female elected officials may coexist with continued inequality in the distribution of power within the institution itself. From a sociological perspective, this means that the barrier has shifted from the **barrier of entry** to the **barrier of positioning within the institution**—that is, from the question of access to the council to the question of access to decision-making centers.

At the parliamentary level, women's representation remained relatively low following the 2021 elections. The National People's Assembly had 32 women, representing 7.9% during the subsequent phase, while the Council of the Nation had seven women out of 170 members in February 2022, equivalent to approximately 4.1%. Inter-Parliamentary Union data indicate that these proportions remained substantially below the levels recorded in 2012 and 2017: women accounted for 31.6% of the National People's Assembly in 2012 and 25.8% in 2017, compared with 8.1% following the 2021 elections. These figures should not be read merely as a statistical decline, because they reveal the difficulty of moving from **legally protected representation** to **representation based on independent political competition**. The 2012 experience demonstrated that changing legal rules could transform the social composition of the legislative institution within a relatively short period, whereas the 2021 experience showed that such transformation did not necessarily guarantee the accumulation of women's political capital capable of being sustained after the rules of competition changed. Sustainability, therefore, rather than numerical increase alone, becomes a central criterion for analyzing the experience of women's representation.

This observation becomes even more important when moving to the executive sphere. The presence of women in government or in certain senior positions does not necessarily reflect the level of representation within elected institutions, because executive appointment follows processes different from parliamentary and local elections. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between **electoral presence**, **executive presence**, and **leadership presence**, rather than combining them into a single indicator. Moreover, the number of women occupying government positions changes according to ministerial reshuffles and government reconfigurations. Consequently, any measurement must specify the exact date of the governmental composition and should not treat a particular figure as constant throughout the 2022–2026 period.

The 2024 presidential elections provide another example of the need to distinguish between different levels of political participation. Several women expressed an intention to run for president, but the candidacy process did not result in a woman appearing among the final list of candidates who contested the election. However, the individual cases were not legally identical. The electoral authority rejected Saida Neghza's candidacy file, after which the Constitutional Court considered her appeal, while Louisa Hanoune announced her withdrawal from the race before the election. The analysis of this process should therefore distinguish between **declared candidacy**, **acceptance of the candidacy file**, **withdrawal**, and **final inclusion in the list of candidates**, rather than reducing these different cases to a single concept of "rejection of women's candidacies."

These developments are sociologically significant because they demonstrate that weak women's representation may emerge at different stages of the political system: access to candidacy, obtaining political-party endorsement, satisfying candidacy requirements, transforming candidacy into votes, and reaching leadership positions after election. Accordingly, the concept of "paralysis" used in the title of this study should be understood as **a disruption in the chain through which social presence is transformed into institutional political power**, rather than as an absolute absence of women from the political sphere.

The elections for the National People's Assembly held on 2 July 2026 provide the strongest quantitative indicator of the continuation of this trend. National turnout reached **21.24%**, according to the Constitutional Court's final announcement, while women obtained **25 seats out of 407, or only 6.14%**. The results also showed that candidates under the age of 40 obtained 126 seats, representing 30.96%, while candidates with university-level education obtained 312 seats, representing 76.65%.

A comparison of this result with the preceding trajectory identifies a clear trend in numerical representation: 31.6% in 2012, 25.8% in 2017, 8.1% in 2021, and 6.1% following the July 2026 elections. According to Inter-Parliamentary Union data, Algeria ranked 171st globally in August 2026 in terms of the proportion of women in the National People's Assembly, at 6.1%. This ranking should not itself be transformed into an evaluative judgment, but it provides a comparative indicator of Algeria's position in parliamentary women's representation following the 2026 elections.

Alongside this numerical decline, a major institutional development of considerable symbolic significance occurred with the election of **Khalida Boufedeché** as Speaker of the National People's Assembly on 28 July 2026, making her the first woman to hold the speakership of a parliamentary chamber in Algeria's history. Both Algeria Press Service and the Inter-Parliamentary Union confirmed this development.

This paradox reveals an important theoretical issue: **individual symbolic progress** may occur alongside continued weakness in collective representation. The presence of a woman at the head of parliament does not necessarily mean that women have become broadly represented within the institution, since the same data show that women account for only 25 of the 407 members of the new Assembly. The election of a woman to the speakership therefore represents an institutionally and historically significant event, but it does not eliminate the numerical gap within the institution. It is consequently necessary to distinguish between **the symbolic significance of individual access to the top of the institutional hierarchy** and **the expansion of the collective base of representation**.

From this perspective, the concept of a “**symbolic milestone**” is more precise than interpreting the event as definitive evidence of an improvement in women’s political position. Symbolic progress may play an important role in breaking perceptual barriers surrounding women’s political leadership and may contribute to redefining the image of leadership within the institution. However, its impact on collective representation requires independent measurement through the number of women elected, their positions within committees, their leadership of parliamentary structures, their participation in legislative formulation, and their continuity within party and electoral politics.

In the same context, 2026 witnessed an important amendment to the Organic Law relating to the electoral system. The Council of the Nation approved the amendment to Organic Law No. 21-01 on 2 April 2026, while the amended law was subsequently published in the Official Gazette in April. The amendment stipulated that candidate lists for elections to the National People’s Assembly must include **at least one-third women**, while retaining the requirement that at least half of the candidates be under forty years of age and at least one-third have university-level education. The ordering of candidates on the lists was also assigned to political parties or candidates on independent lists, according to the cases established by law.

Analytically, this amendment represents a new transition in the architecture of women’s representation: following the 2012 system, which linked quotas to multiple legal percentages according to constituency size, and the 2021 system, which incorporated parity into the conditions governing the formation of lists under the system of open lists, ...

## VII. Dissecting “Representation Paralysis”: A Sociological and Analytical Reading

If the preceding sections have revealed the historical and electoral trajectory of Algerian women’s political representation, explaining this trajectory requires moving from a description of the figures to a deconstruction of the mechanisms that produce them. “**Representation paralysis**” does not mean the absence of women from the political sphere, nor does it imply an absence of their ability to stand for election or win seats. Rather, it refers to a condition of **disconnection between numerical presence and the capacity to transform that presence into sustainable political influence, leadership positions, and institutional impact**. From this perspective, the phenomenon can be analyzed through five interconnected levels: the legal-procedural, partisan, cultural-symbolic, institutional, and descriptive–substantive representation levels.

### 1. The Legal-Procedural Level: From Guaranteed Presence to the Test of Competitive Capacity

The electoral law represents the starting point for explaining transformations in women’s representation, but it does not operate independently of the other components of the political field. The 2012 framework imposed legal quotas that varied according to the size of the electoral constituency, ranging for the National People’s Assembly from 20% to 50% of candidates. This enabled a historic increase in the number of women within the Assembly, with their proportion reaching 31.6% in 2012, corresponding to 146 women out of 462 seats. However, assessing the effectiveness of quotas cannot stop at the proportion of female candidates, because their impact is also determined by how names are positioned on electoral lists and by the rules governing the transition from a position on the list to an elected seat. The issue, therefore, is not simply the “existence of a quota,” but the nature of the protection provided by the quota throughout the different stages of the electoral process.

It is important here to correct the assumption that the 2012 law left the ranking of female candidates entirely unregulated. Article 3 of Organic Law No. 12-03 linked the allocation of seats reserved for women to the order of candidates on winning lists. The more precise issue, therefore, is not the absence of a legal ranking rule, but the extent to which the overall system was capable of ensuring that women occupied competitive and sufficiently advanced positions within electoral lists. This distinction is important because it shifts the analysis from a general statement about the “absence of ranking” to a more precise question concerning **list design and the positioning of female candidates within those lists**. In 2021, this architecture was reshaped through the system of open lists and preferential voting, while retaining the requirement of gender parity for the acceptance of electoral lists, alongside conditions relating to candidates’ age and university-level education. A total of 22,554 candidates participated in the legislative elections, including 8,305 women, representing 36.8% of all candidates. Yet only 33 women were elected out of 407 seats, representing 8.1%. This paradox demonstrates that the problem did not lie in women’s absence from the candidacy stage, but rather in their transition from **electoral supply to effective electoral victory**.

Accordingly, the law is not an entirely neutral framework; it forms part of the structure that determines political actors’ opportunities. Variations in list systems, vote-counting procedures, candidates’ positions on lists, and conditions governing the acceptance of lists can all alter the distribution of opportunities between men and women. International comparisons have shown that the design of quotas should not be measured solely by the proportion of female candidates, but also by mechanisms for placing women in winnable positions and by the strength of sanctions associated with non-

compliance. The Algerian experience therefore provides an important example of the need to study **quotas as an integrated institutional system**, rather than as a mere numerical percentage.

## 2. The Partisan Level: From Nominating Women to Producing Women's Leadership

Political parties constitute the principal intermediary between society and elected institutions. They select candidates, determine their positions on lists where the law permits such discretion, and provide an important share of organizational, media, and electoral resources. Consequently, weak women's representation cannot be explained solely through voters or electoral law, because a decisive stage in the production of representation occurs before citizens reach the ballot box, within political organizations themselves.

The importance of this level lies in the fact that quotas can impose women's presence on electoral lists, but they cannot by themselves produce a **cohesive female political elite** unless they are accompanied by internal transformation within political parties. Candidacy may become merely a response to a legal requirement, while organizational positions, resources, and the constituencies offering greater chances of winning remain connected to established political networks. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between **"including women"** on electoral lists and **"producing women as political leaders"** within political parties.

This issue becomes particularly important in light of the 2012 experience. The imposition of a legal minimum significantly expanded the pool of female candidates, but it did not automatically lead to the emergence of an independent and self-reproducing female partisan structure. Sustainable representation requires women to move from the position of candidates benefiting from a legal mechanism to that of political actors possessing organizational experience, political networks, and resources that enable them to compete even when the rules of the game change.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, this can be interpreted through the concept of **political capital**. Organizational experience, position within the party, relational networks, access to decision-makers, and knowledge of the rules of the political field constitute resources that are not equally distributed among actors. Consequently, bringing women into electoral competition does not necessarily entail redistributing these resources. This may produce a paradox whereby the number of women within an institution increases while their presence in the positions where political decisions are produced remains limited.

## 3. The Cultural-Symbolic Level: Women between Electoral Legitimacy and Social Recognition

Women's political participation cannot be understood without analyzing the cultural meanings surrounding the image of women in politics. Voting is not merely a legal act; it is also a social act involving trust, reputation, personal familiarity, local affiliations, and stereotypes concerning leadership. In societies where kinship networks and direct personal acquaintance remain influential within the electoral arena, candidates' social resources may become important factors in constructing political trust.

However, caution is required before reducing Algerian electoral behavior to "family voting" or "kinship" alone. These factors interact with party affiliation, political programs, personal reputation, local interests, and other considerations. Sociological analysis should therefore not assume in advance that voters reject women, but should instead examine how the legitimacy of female candidates is constructed within local and national political fields.

Here, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of **symbolic violence** becomes relevant, not as a description of every criticism directed at women parliamentarians, but as a mechanism through which unequal relations may be rendered natural or ordinary. When women politicians are reduced to their appearance, private lives, or capacity to perform traditional social roles rather than being assessed according to competence, experience, and political programs, symbolic inequality may be reproduced within the political field. Women may consequently be required to demonstrate their political legitimacy in ways that are not necessarily demanded of men to the same extent.

This issue is also connected to the contribution of the **intersectional approach**. Women do not constitute a socially homogeneous group. A woman with high educational, professional, and social capital may possess political resources radically different from those of a woman from a rural or working-class environment with more limited resources. Thus, increasing the overall proportion of women does not, by itself, reveal **which women gain access to power**, nor whether representation reflects the social diversity of Algerian women.

## 4. The Institutional Level: From Council Membership to the Distribution of Power Within It

Membership in parliament or a local council constitutes an entry point into the institution, but it does not imply equal power within it. Political power is also distributed through the presidency of the council, committee leadership, participation in governing bodies, the ability to place issues on the agenda, involvement in negotiations, and participation in the drafting of legislation. Measuring representation solely by the number of seats may therefore conceal internal inequalities in the distribution of influence.

The Algerian experience clearly demonstrates the importance of this distinction. Despite the significant increase in women's parliamentary representation in 2012, access to senior leadership positions remained more limited. The same logic applies to local councils, where official data reveal a continuing gap between the number of elected women and the number of women who reach council presidencies. This means that the process of representation does not end with election; it continues within the institution through the distribution of roles, resources, and opportunities.

Furthermore, claims concerning a "gendered distribution" of committees should be based on actual data concerning committee membership and leadership rather than on a prior assumption that women are always directed toward social committees and excluded from financial or regulatory committees. The present study can therefore use this proposition

as an analytical question requiring verification rather than as an established fact. This is more consistent with a sociological approach that distinguishes between **hypotheses and empirical findings**.

This level demonstrates that formal equality in the number of seats does not necessarily imply equality in influence. A woman may be a member of an institution without necessarily possessing the same capacity to access resources, build alliances, lead committees, or place particular issues on the agenda. The concept of **women's leadership** is therefore more complex than merely having a woman occupy an official position.

### 5. The Representational Level: From Descriptive to Substantive Representation

At this level, the analysis reaches the core of the concept of "representation paralysis." Descriptive representation measures the numerical presence of women within an institution, whereas substantive representation concerns whether this presence translates into actual attention to the interests of the citizens they represent and into the capacity to influence legislation and public policy. Algeria's trajectory demonstrates that the transition from the first level to the second is not automatic.

In 2012, women's representation in the National People's Assembly rose to 31.6%, a historic increase compared with previous elections. However, the increase in numbers alone does not allow us to conclude that a unified "women's bloc" or an independent women's legislative program emerged. Female parliamentarians belonged to different political parties and ideological orientations, and their priorities and positions could therefore vary accordingly. Accordingly, stating that "women's presence produced no legislative impact" would be an exaggeration, just as claiming that the mere increase in numbers produced fully substantive representation would be an equally unwarranted conclusion.

Law No. 15-19, amending the Penal Code and containing provisions criminalizing and penalizing forms of violence against women, provides one example through which this relationship can be examined. However, the existence of such legislation during a period of increased women's representation does not establish that its adoption was directly caused by the number of female parliamentarians, nor does it demonstrate that women made no contribution to it. It should therefore be treated as **a case for examining the relationship between descriptive representation and legislative outcomes**, rather than as definitive causal evidence.

The significance of this approach lies in preventing a simplified binary in which quotas either "succeeded" or "failed." In numerical terms, they succeeded in substantially increasing women's presence in 2012; however, the sustainability of this presence remained limited, as subsequent comparisons demonstrate. Conversely, the decline in numbers does not mean that all political influence exercised by women disappeared. The more precise concept is therefore **the gap between descriptive representation, sustainability, and substantive representation**.

Taken together, these five levels lead to an analytical model that can be formulated as follows:

**Legal and electoral rules → list formation and candidate selection → partisan, social, and political resources → competition and voting → access to the institution → distribution of positions within the institution → capacity to influence → accumulation of political capital → sustainability of representation.**

This model demonstrates that women's representation is not the outcome of a single variable. The law may open the door to entry, but the party determines part of the opportunities for candidacy; the list determines the candidate's position within the competition; social and political resources affect the ability to obtain votes; and the institution subsequently redistributes power after election. Consequently, any explanation focusing exclusively on "quotas" remains incomplete, just as an explanation based solely on social culture overlooks the effects of institutions and legal rules.

Accordingly, "representation paralysis" can be operationally defined in this study as the recurring gap between the increased or continuing possibility of women's numerical presence at the stages of candidacy and election, and the limited sustainability of that presence, its access to leadership positions, and its transformation into institutional influence and substantive representation. With this definition, the concept becomes analytically applicable without turning into a preconceived judgment about the Algerian experience.

The central conclusion emerging from this analysis is that the representation crisis is not a crisis of "women" as such, but rather a crisis of the mechanisms through which political representation is produced. When the law changes, opportunities for access change; when party structures remain unable to produce independent female leaders, representation remains largely dependent on externally imposed rules; and when political and symbolic resources are distributed unequally, an elected seat becomes the beginning of a new process of negotiating power rather than its endpoint. The transition from "Quota Numbers" to sustainable representation therefore requires viewing women as political actors who need the accumulation of experience, organization, and political capital, rather than merely as beneficiaries of a temporary legal measure.

Accordingly, the trajectory from 2012 to 2026 does not support the conclusion that quotas were ineffective, nor does it support the claim that they solved the problem of representation. More accurately, they demonstrated the capacity of law to re-engineer representation in the short term, while simultaneously revealing that sustaining this transformation depends on factors extending beyond the law itself. This is the central paradox that gives the Algerian experience analytical significance: the state was able to change the number rapidly, but transforming that number into accumulated women's political capital, institutional leadership, and sustainable substantive representation proved considerably more complex.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of the trajectory of Algerian women's political participation during the period from 2012 to 2026 reveals an uneven path combining rapid legal transformation with the difficulty of consolidating sustainable women's political

representation. The reforms introduced in 2012 produced an unprecedented quantitative leap in the history of parliamentary representation in Algeria, with women accounting for 31.6%, or 146 women out of 462 seats, before declining to 25.8% in 2017, 8.1% in 2021, and finally 6.1% following the July 2026 elections, in which 25 women were elected out of 407 seats. This trajectory demonstrates that women's representation has not followed a linear upward trend; rather, it has been closely associated with changes in legal and electoral rules and with the mechanisms governing list formation and the conversion of candidacy into actual seats.

The local experience has followed a similar pattern, albeit to varying degrees. Legal support mechanisms contributed to expanding women's presence in People's Municipal Assemblies and People's Provincial Assemblies, yet the transition from membership to leadership remained more limited. This is reflected in the continuing gap between the number of women elected and their access to the presidency of local councils. The issue, therefore, is not merely to ensure entry into elected institutions, but also to ensure women's capacity to remain within them, reach positions of responsibility, and exercise influence over decision-making processes.

At the parliamentary level, the longitudinal comparison shows that the decline in representation after 2021 was not associated with an absence of female candidacy. The 2021 elections witnessed a substantial presence of women among candidates, while the electoral process ultimately resulted in a limited number of women winning seats. This discrepancy between high female presence at the candidacy stage and low representation at the electoral victory stage confirms that the study of political participation should not stop at measuring the number of female candidates. It should also examine the various stages through which representation is produced: candidate selection, candidates' positions on lists, available resources, voting patterns, and women's positions within institutions after election.

This finding becomes particularly significant when considering the July 2026 elections. Voter turnout stood at 21.2%, while only 25 women were elected out of 407 seats. Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union also indicated that Algeria ranked 171st worldwide in terms of the proportion of women in its National People's Assembly in August 2026, with women accounting for 6.1%. This ranking should not be interpreted as an evaluative judgment, but rather as a comparative indicator of the position of women's representation in Algeria at that particular point in time.

Nevertheless, the numerical decline did not prevent an important symbolic and institutional development, namely the election of Khalida Boufedeché as Speaker of the National People's Assembly on 28 July 2026, making her the first woman to hold this position. This development reveals a significant paradox: individual advancement at the top of the institutional hierarchy may occur while the collective numerical representation of women remains limited. Therefore, symbolic access to a leadership position should not substitute for indicators of quantitative representation, sustainability, and participation across different levels of decision-making.

This allows the concept of "Representation Paralysis," adopted in this study, to be reformulated more precisely. It does not mean the absence of women from politics, nor does it imply that all forms of women's participation are merely symbolic. Rather, it refers to the gap between the possibility of accessing political institutions and the capacity to transform such access into sustainable presence, leadership positioning, institutional influence, and substantive representation. This gap has appeared at several stages: between candidacy and electoral victory, between membership and leadership, between numerical presence and continuity, and between individual access to high-level positions and the expansion of the broader base of women's political representation.

Accordingly, the Algerian quota experience cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy of success or failure. Quantitatively, the experience demonstrated that legal intervention can rapidly alter the social composition of elected institutions. At the same time, subsequent declines showed that numerical increases do not automatically become a stable social and political basis for reproducing women's political leadership. Historical data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union highlight the substantial difference between 146 women elected in 2012 and 25 women in 2026, thereby underscoring the importance of **the sustainability of representation mechanisms**, rather than merely increasing the proportion of women in a single electoral cycle.

On the basis of these findings, the study proposes the following interconnected recommendations:

**1. Strengthening legal guarantees for women's representation:** Electoral reform should go beyond establishing a minimum proportion of women on candidate lists and ensure that this proportion is associated with electorally viable positions. Clear rules governing candidate ordering and effective mechanisms for monitoring compliance should also be established so that the inclusion of women on lists does not become merely a formal response to a legal requirement.

**2. Linking numerical representation to leadership representation:** Reform should not end with guaranteeing seats for women. More effective mechanisms should be examined to expand women's access to the presidencies of councils, committees, and other leadership bodies, while respecting the democratic internal rules of elected institutions. The issue identified by this study is not only the number of women within an institution, but also their position within the decision-making hierarchy.

**3. Reforming the internal structure of political parties:** Political parties constitute a central link in the production of political elites. Strengthening women's participation therefore requires more transparent internal mechanisms for candidate selection, encouragement of women's access to leadership positions, and clear pathways for political advancement and organizational training. Sustainability cannot be produced by electoral law alone if the mechanisms through which political elites are reproduced within political organizations remain unchanged.

**4. Developing political training and empowerment programs:** Continuous training programs should be developed in areas such as legislation, electoral campaign management, political negotiation, communication, local council administration, and public policy formulation. Universities, research centers, and civil society organizations can play an important role in developing this type of political and knowledge capital, particularly for women entering political life for the first time.

**5. Supporting participation at the local level:** People's Municipal Assemblies and People's Provincial Assemblies should be treated as important arenas for developing political experience and building political elites, rather than merely as secondary electoral levels. Local political experience provides women with opportunities to acquire skills in administration, negotiation, articulating demands, and interacting with citizens—resources that can subsequently be transformed into national political capital.

**6. Improving electoral databases and statistics:** Academic research requires regular and detailed official data disaggregated by gender and electoral level, including the number of male and female candidates, their positions on candidate lists, electoral results, ages, party affiliations, and subsequent positions within elected councils. Measuring representation should therefore not be limited to the final number of elected women, but should enable researchers to trace the entire trajectory from candidacy to leadership.

**7. Evaluating the effectiveness of each electoral reform according to its actual outcomes:** Quotas and other legal mechanisms should not be evaluated solely on the basis of the number of women included on candidate lists, but also according to their capacity to produce sustainable representation. Composite indicators could therefore be developed combining the proportion of female candidates, the proportion of women elected, the proportion of women in leadership positions, electoral continuity, participation in committees, and involvement in legislative processes.

These recommendations demonstrate that the issue is not simply one of “raising the percentage,” but rather one of constructing an integrated institutional chain beginning with candidacy, proceeding through competition and electoral victory, followed by positioning within the institution, and culminating in the accumulation of political and leadership experience and capital. If one of these links is disrupted, numerical representation may increase at a particular stage without producing sustainable change in the structure of the political field.

The Algerian experience between 2012 and 2026 thus illustrates the distinction between the legal engineering of representation and the social structure through which political power is produced. The state demonstrated its capacity to increase women's presence when strong legal mechanisms were available; however, the subsequent trajectory revealed that law alone is insufficient to guarantee sustainability. The election of a woman as Speaker of the National People's Assembly in 2026 also represents an important symbolic and institutional development, but it occurred alongside women's representation of only 6.1% of the Assembly, underscoring the need to distinguish between individual advancement and structural change.

Accordingly, the transition from “Quota Numbers” to sustainable political representation requires reconsidering women's political participation as a cumulative process rather than as a single electoral intervention. The objective is not merely to bring more women into political institutions, but to create conditions enabling them to develop experience, political capital, organizational networks, and leadership and influence capacities. In this sense, overcoming “Representation Paralysis” cannot be achieved merely by changing a legal percentage; it requires rebuilding the conditions that make women's political presence sustainable and capable of developing into an effective institutional political practice.

**Table 1. Evolution of Women's Representation in the National People's Assembly (2007–2026)**

| Election year / Assembly composition | Total seats | Women's seats    | Percentage   |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|------------------|--------------|
| 2007                                 | 389         | Approximately 30 | 7.7%         |
| <b>2012 (legal quota)</b>            | <b>462</b>  | <b>146</b>       | <b>31.6%</b> |
| 2017                                 | 462         | 119              | 25.8%        |
| 2021                                 | 407         | 33               | 8.1%         |
| 2022–2024*                           | 407         | 32               | 7.9%         |
| July 2026                            | 407         | 25               | 6.1%         |

**Source:** Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Parline, data on the Algerian National People's Assembly, supplemented by relevant official electoral data.

\* This row represents the parliamentary composition during the period preceding the July 2026 elections and does not constitute a separate election year.

**Table 2. Women's Presence in Local Elected Councils**

| Indicator                                     | 2007  | 2012–2017 | 2021                       |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------|-----------|----------------------------|
| Women in People's Municipal Assemblies (APC)  | 0.76% | 16.5%     | <b>1,015 elected women</b> |
| Women in People's Provincial Assemblies (APW) | 6.9%  | 29.7%     | <b>138 elected women</b>   |
| Total women elected locally                   | —     | —         | <b>1,153 elected women</b> |

|                                                              |                   |                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Women serving as Presidents of People's Municipal Assemblies | — —               | <b>7 presidents</b>                    |
| Women's position within executive bodies                     | Limited Expanding | Deputy presidents and committee chairs |

**Source:** Ministry of Interior, Local Authorities and Territorial Development, data on women's political participation and the results of the 2021 local elections.

### Commentary on the Tables

The data reveal a transition from a substantial increase in parliamentary representation following the adoption of the quota mechanism in 2012, to a gradual decline in 2017, followed by a sharp decrease after the 2021 elections, reaching 6.1% in the National People's Assembly elected in July 2026. At the local level, however, the 2021 data show the continued presence of a substantial number of elected women, reaching 1,153, compared with limited access to the presidencies of People's Municipal Assemblies, where the number of women presidents stood at seven. Accordingly, comparing the national and local levels makes it possible to distinguish three interconnected dimensions of political representation: **numerical presence, institutional continuity, and access to leadership and decision-making positions.**

### References

#### I. Arabic and Algerian References

- ✓ People's Democratic Republic of Algeria. (2012). **Organic Law No. 12-03 of 12 January 2012, Establishing the Procedures for Expanding Women's Opportunities for Representation in Elected Councils.** Official Gazette of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria.
- ✓ People's Democratic Republic of Algeria. (2015). **Law No. 15-19 of 30 December 2015, Amending and Supplementing Ordinance No. 66-156 Containing the Penal Code.** Official Gazette of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria.
- ✓ People's Democratic Republic of Algeria. (2021). **Organic Law No. 21-01 of 10 March 2021, Relating to the Electoral System.** Official Gazette of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria.
- ✓ People's Democratic Republic of Algeria. (2021). **Organic Law No. 21-02 of 16 March 2021.** Official Gazette of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria.
- ✓ Ministry of Interior, Local Authorities and Territorial Development. (2021). **Local Governance and Support for Women's Participation in Public Life.** Algiers.
- ✓ Djabi, N. (2017). **Statement on Local Elections and Voting Patterns in Algeria**, cited by Agence France-Presse, November 2017.
- ✓ Tisembal, R. (2012). **Promoting Women's Representation in Elected Councils in Algeria: Legal and Democratic Issues.** *Maaref Journal*, 7(13), 61–72.

#### II. Foreign References

- ✓ Bourdieu, P. (1991). La représentation politique. Éléments pour une théorie du champ politique. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 130–131.
- ✓ Bourdieu, P. (1998). *La domination masculine*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- ✓ Charrad, M. M. (2001). *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- ✓ Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1).
- ✓ Dahlerup, D., & Freidenvall, L. (2005). Quotas as a "fast track" to equal representation for women: Why Scandinavia is no longer the model. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 7(1).
- ✓ Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center for Women and Development. (2024). *The Silent Half: Why Women Remain Absent in Algerian Elections*. 7 September 2024.
- ✓ Guemar, L. (2012). Women and the Algerian parliamentary elections. *LSE Engenderings*. 21 June 2012.
- ✓ Htun, M. (2003). *Sex and the State: Abortion, Divorce, and the Family under Latin American Dictatorships and Democracies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ✓ International IDEA. (2013). *Atlas of Electoral Gender Quotas*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
- ✓ International IDEA. (2021). *Women's Political Participation: Africa Barometer 2021*. Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.
- ✓ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2026). *Parline Database: Algeria — National People's Assembly: Data on Women*. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- ✓ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2026). *Parline Database: Algeria — National People's Assembly: Election of 2 July 2026*. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- ✓ Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2026). *Parline Database: Algeria — Council of the Nation: Data on Women*. Geneva: Inter-Parliamentary Union.
- ✓ Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2(3).
- ✓ Mala Htun. (2003). *Sex and the State: Abortion, Divorce, and the Family under Latin American Dictatorships and Democracies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- ✓ Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2003). Cultural obstacles to equal representation. *Journal of Democracy*, 14(3).
- ✓ Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- ✓ Tripp, A. M., & Kang, A. (2008). The global impact of quotas: On the fast track to increased female legislative representation. *Comparative Political Studies*, 41(3).
- ✓ UN Women. (2012). *Statement on Algeria's Parliamentary Elections*. United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.
- ✓ Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- ✓ Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (2021). *Women and Politics in Algeria: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*. 15 September 2021.
- ✓ Women's Electoral Monitoring and Communication Center. (2024). *Report on the Monitoring of Women's Political Participation in the 2024 Presidential Election in Algeria*.
- ✓ Hadjaj, A. (2026). *From 31% to 8% Women in Algeria's National Assembly, or, How Half the Population Is Disappearing from Political Decision-Making*. Medfeminiswiya, 6 May 2026.
- ✓ LNR-DZ. (2021). *La leçon des élections locales de novembre 2012 à novembre 2021*. 29 November 2021.
- ✓ France 24/Agence France-Presse. (2026). *Algeria's 2026 Parliamentary Elections: Results and Political Participation*. July 2026.