

Rising Voices: Women's Leadership in Arab Education Unions

Opportunities, Challenges, Obstacles & Solutions for Increasing Women's Participation and Leadership

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Women engaged in trade union activities encounter a range of structural and cultural barriers, including significant underrepresentation in leadership positions and societal norms that restrict their active and autonomous participation in union affairs. In some education sectors, women represent about 70 percent of the workforce, yet they remain largely absent from leadership positions. This discrepancy is particularly evident in education unions across Arab countries. Women's aspirations are often limited by a range of socio-cultural barriers. These barriers include limited awareness of the significance of union participation, constraining familial and societal expectations, and pervasive systemic sexism. Women in education unions continue to face persistent challenges such as male-dominated leadership structures, the marginalization of their voices, and insufficient institutional mechanisms to ensure their equitable representation. In light of these challenges, Education International decided to conduct this study in six Arab

countries in partnership with a significant number of Arab education unions: Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine. Education International, the largest global federation of education unions, represents 33 million workers in the sector through 375 member organizations in 180 countries and territories. This research was commissioned by the Office of Arab Moroccan Studies (Acetre Consulting), in partnership with the Institute of Trade Unions for Development Cooperation (ISCOD), due to their demonstrated expertise in formulating pragmatic strategies aimed at enhancing the leadership capacities of women within education unions. This report presents the findings of this research and argues that recognizing the importance of women's participation in union work alongside implementing structural reforms within unions is essential for establishing dedicated platforms that address women's issues and provide them with sustainable support.



Objectives of the study

General Objective:

To identify obstacles, opportunities, and potential solutions to enhance women's participation and leadership in Arab education unions in six countries: Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine.

Specific Objectives:

- **Analyse women's representation and inclusion in the decision-making processes** of Arab education unions across six countries.
- **Identify key internal and external barriers to women's participation and leadership**, including geographical disparities, socio-economic and cultural constraints, and familial responsibilities.
- **Evaluate the effectiveness of existing union policies or measures** aimed at reducing gender disparities in union engagement and leadership roles.
- **Evaluate current mechanisms that support work-life balance** and propose context-specific strategies for their enhancement.
- **Develop actionable recommendations** to promote and increase women's participation within education union structures.

Study Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach by combining participatory workshops with an online survey distributed among union members. The research process was conducted in six sequential phases: (1) defining study objectives, (2) preparing relevant documentation, (3) facilitating union-based workshops, (4) organizing a feedback workshop, (5) analyzing the collected data and preparing the final report, and (6) presenting the findings of the research.

A total of eight education unions participated in this study including: *Syndicat National de l'Enseignement - Confédération Démocratique du Travail* (SNE-CDT) (Morocco), *Syndicat National de l'Enseignement - Fédération Démocratique du Travail* (SNE-FDT) (Morocco), *Iraqi Teachers Union* (ITU) (Iraq), *Kurdistan Teachers Union*, (KTU Iraq), *Fédération générale de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche scientifique*, (FGESRS, Tunisia), *General Union of Palestinian Teachers* (GUPT, Palestine), *Teachers Syndicate of Lebanon* (TSL, Lebanon), and the *Egyptian Teachers Syndicate* (ETS, Egypt).

Questionnaire

The survey consisted of five sections: I. Personal information, II. Women's participation in education unions, III. Leadership in unions and IV. Experience and perceptions of gender equality, and V. Suggestions and final remarks. The analysis was based on the responses from 1,451 individuals affiliated with the eight member organizations, of whom 830 were women equivalent to 57.20% of the total sample.



SNE-CDT
Morocco



SNE-FDT
Morocco



ITU
IRAQ



KTU
IRAQ



UGTT
Tunisia



GUPT
Palestine



TSL
Lebanon



ETS
Egypt



Results of the field study

Section I: Personal Information

The findings revealed a significant decline in women's participation among older age groups (60 and above), which was associated with their limited access to leadership positions (42.30%). Despite women comprising the majority of workforce in primary (62.79%) and early childhood education (100%), their representation in managerial positions remains comparatively low at 41.79%. Geographical disparities were also evident: participation was highest in urban areas (66.99%) while rural (19.30%) and peri-urban (13.71%) regions exhibited markedly lower levels of involvement, further underscoring structural barriers to engagement in marginalized areas. Nevertheless, women constituted the majority of overall union membership (65.77%).

Section II: Women's Participation in the Union

The data suggest that women are relatively recent entrants to union activities, with most reporting involvement spanning from two to five years, whereas men demonstrate longer-term engagement. Men also predominate in education union structures and showed greater consistency in renewing their memberships. Female candidacy for leadership positions remains significantly low, with the majority of respondents estimating that women occupy less than 30% of leadership roles. Among those who acknowledged this underrepresentation, 55.96% were women.

At the individual level, barriers to women's participation included gender stereotypes (identified by 33.15% of respondents), lack of experience (26.12%), limited self-confidence, fear of failure, and family responsibilities. Cultural and social obstacles were also

prominent, with respondents citing social pressure (47.62%), domestic duties (37.15%), and prevailing male dominance (32.67%). At the institutional level, challenges included male-dominated structures (35.15%), lack of training opportunities (32.53%), limited access to mentorship (30.60%), absence of gender-sensitive policies, and the persistence of discriminatory practices.

Section III: Leadership in Unions

Leadership within unions remains predominantly male, with men occupying 64.40% of leadership positions, and 79.12% of them having held these roles for over a decade. In contrast, 45.88% of women in leadership roles have served for less than two years, highlighting a significant gender gap in leadership tenure. Female leaders face distinct challenges, including the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities and a lack of institutional support. Conversely, male leaders more frequently reported challenges related to institutional dynamics and aging. Key competencies identified for effective leadership include communication skills, negotiation abilities, knowledge of labor rights, and personal aptitude. Mechanisms identified as promoting female leadership include gender quotas (30.12%), women-specific organizational structures (25.50%), anti-discrimination and equality policies (20.95%), and the integration of gender mainstreaming into union policies (17.44%).

Section IV: Experiences and Perceptions of Gender Equality

The Survey responses demonstrated broad support for gender equality initiatives within union structures. Key areas of endorsement included the promotion of equality in union governance (50.17%), leadership opportunities for women (42.73%), the implementation of anti-discrimination policies (48.10%), and the integration

of women's perspectives into union agendas (48.17%).

The analysis identified nine primary internal challenges faced by Arab education unions in advancing gender equality spanning personal, societal, and institutional dimensions. At the personal level, significant barriers included domestic responsibilities (29.08% of respondents, **62.80%** of whom were women) and fear of change (15.58%, with **53.98%** women). Societal-level challenges were characterized by the persistence of gender stereotypes (27.02%, **53.57%** women). At the institutional level, key obstacles included the undervaluation of women's capabilities (29.84%, **54.73%** women), gender imbalance in leadership roles (28.26%, **63.17%** women), gendered role allocation (21.43%, **54.02%** women), unequal representation in committees and working groups (18.95%, **55.27%** women), and entrenched patriarchal organizational norms (13.92%, **54.95%** women).

Arab education unions also face twelve major external challenges ranging from societal to institutional domains. At the societal level, key obstacles include cultural values that oppose gender equality (32.80% of respondents, **54.83%** of whom were women), persistent gender stereotypes (32.25%, **57.26%** women), and gender-based violence (15.58%, **53.98%** women). At the institutional level, the most frequently cited challenges were the lack of governmental support (27.02%, **58.67%** women), economic and/or political instability (20.88%, **56.44%** women), and the prioritization of economic concerns over social issues (19.23%, **53.41%** women).

Section V: Final Suggestions and Notes

The study identifies a range of strategic interventions aimed at advancing gender equality within education unions. These strategies address awareness, structural reform, institutional capacity, and sustainability:

Capacity Building and Awareness

- **Raising awareness** and providing training on gender equality through workshops and educational programs (48.10% of respondents, **56.73%** women).
- **Establishing mentorship** programs to support women in attaining leadership roles and to enhance men's understanding of gender equality (48.10% , **56.73%** women).
- **Enhance** the capacities of both women and men through targeted training on positive masculinity and the development of male allies, with

Figure 10: The most important challenges on an individual/personal level

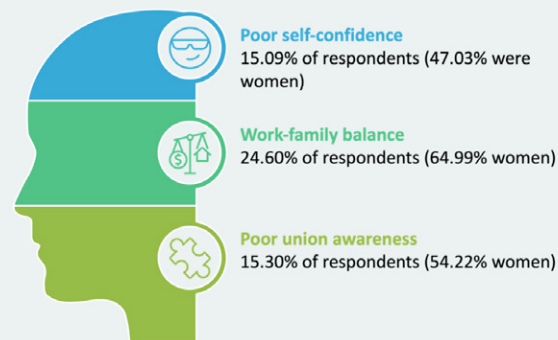


Figure 11: The most important challenges at the societal/cultural level

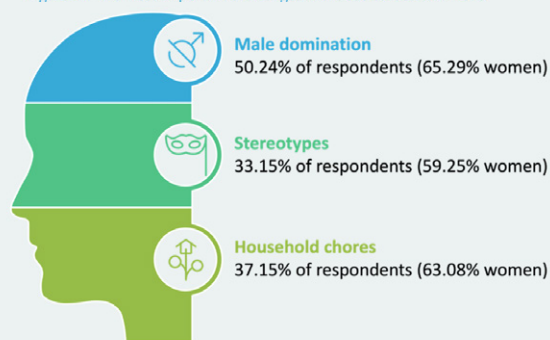
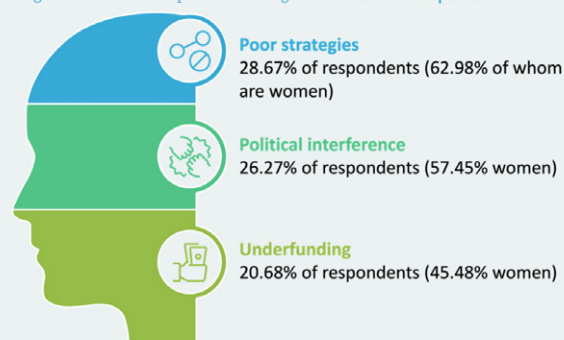


Figure 12: The most important challenges at the institutional/political level





the aim of fostering active support for gender equality and advancing gender justice within trade union structures.

Structural and union Policy Reforms

- **Implement gender quotas** for leadership positions (31.98% of respondents, **61.42%** women).
- **Develop zero-tolerance** policies toward discrimination (29.43%, **58.31%** women).
- **Adopt** union-wide gender equality policies (24.95%, **59.12%** women).
- **Ensure inclusive policy** development by involving women in the drafting and revision of union policies.
- **Integrating intersectional approaches** to address overlapping forms of discrimination (e.g., based on rural/urban status).

Organizational Strengthening

- **Hire and train** gender specialists within unions (30.46% of respondents, **52.94%** women).
- **Create effective communication** strategies for internal and external messaging (22.74%, **53.94%** women).
- **Establish** national and local bodies dedicated to promoting gender equality (22.47%, **57.36%** women).

Sustainability and Outreach

- **Secure sustainable funding** from unions to support gender-related programs and activities (20.68% of respondents, **54.33%** women). This can be done by developing a sustainable and structured financial strategy that includes gender-responsive budgeting, efficient resource management, and diversified funding sources, while also reinforcing and modernizing the union dues system. Together, these measures will ensure consistent and autonomous financial support for all union activities, including gender-related programs, and secure the long-term sustainability of gender equality initiatives.

- **Foster partnerships** with civil society organizations, academic institutions, and international bodies to share best practices and resources.
- **Promote digital inclusion**, especially for women in rural and marginalized areas, to enhance participation and leadership development.
- **Engage youth**, particularly young women, to build a pipeline of future leaders committed to gender equality.

Evaluation and monitoring

- **Establish** a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system with clearly defined key performance indicators (KPIs) to assess the effectiveness of implemented policies, identify best practices, and inform strategic decision-making. This will help ensure the sustainability and long-term impact of interventions.

In conclusion, this study highlights both the progress made and the persistent challenges facing gender equality within Arab education unions. While women constitute a significant portion of union membership and the education workforce, their underrepresentation in leadership roles, coupled with structural, cultural, and institutional barriers, continues to hinder equitable participation. The findings underscore the need for targeted strategies that address these multi-level challenges through awareness-raising, policy reform, institutional capacity building, and inclusive leadership development. Crucially, the success of these efforts depends on a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach that brings together unions, governments, civil society, and international partners. By embracing these recommendations and fostering a culture of inclusion and accountability, education unions can play a transformative role in advancing gender equality and promoting social justice across the region.

Figure 13: Important challenges hindering women's participation/ access to decision-making positions

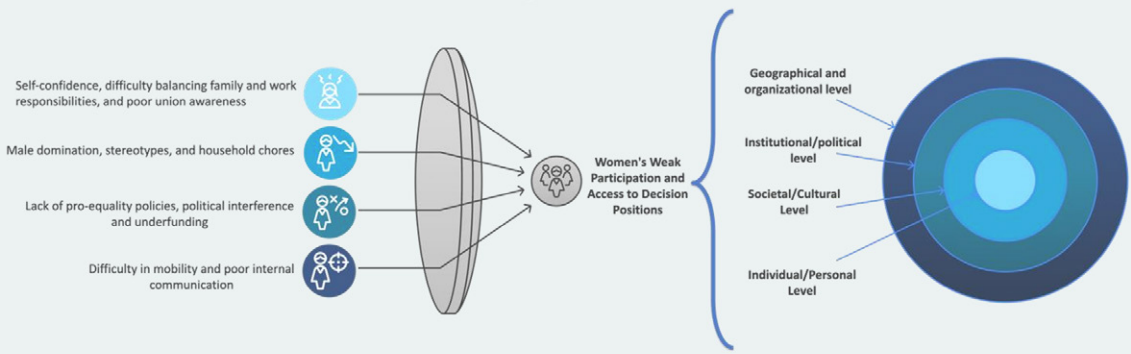


Figure 12: Strategies for promoting gender equality at the domestic level

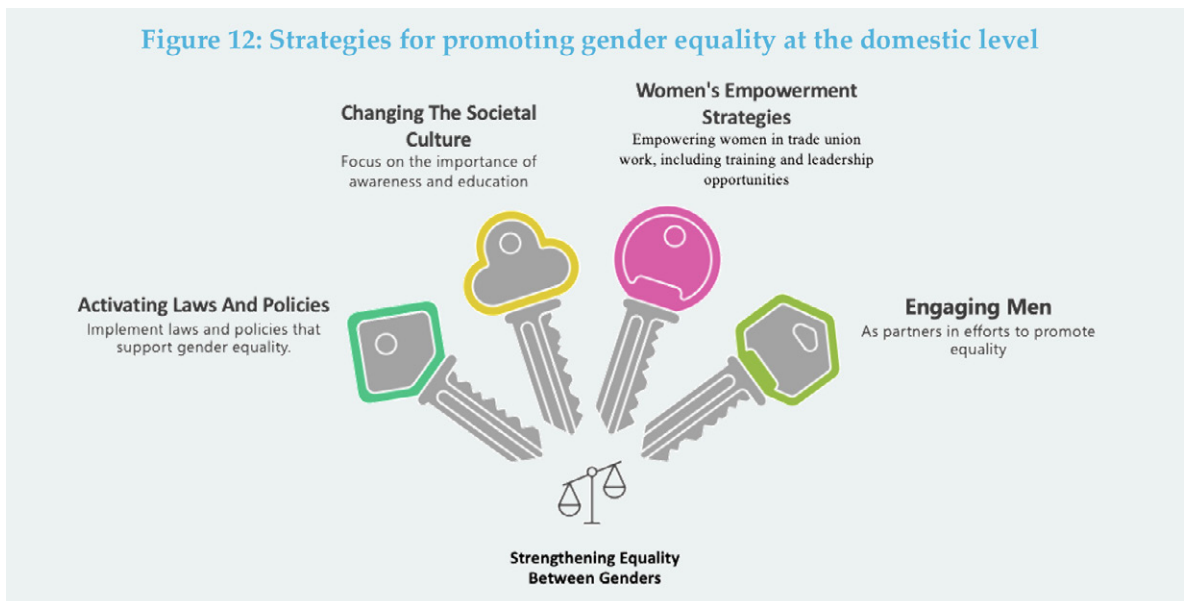


Figure 13: Strategies for promoting gender equality at the external level

