Research Summary

Empowering Palestinian Women's Active Political Participation: Key Findings from Youth-led Research

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Abstract

The research study, conducted by the Palestinian Centre for Peace and Democracy in 2022, delves into the nuanced landscape surrounding women's participation in political spheres and peace processes in Occupied Palestine. Through a youth-led approach, the study sheds light on the multifaceted challenges. It offers strategic recommendations on increasing women's participation in decision-making and the peace process between Israel and Palestine, primarily focusing on intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts. The findings of the study reveal two types of systematic barriers hindering women's political participation: internal, which include the patriarchal structures/institutions, gender stereotypes and norms, and discriminatory legislation, and external, which are linked to the impact of the occupation. Specifically, the socio-economic disparities are both internally connected with gender norms and externally derived from the repressive occupation policies that impact the whole society. Moreover, the freezing of the electoral process, lack of resources, and the absence of comprehensive local government strategies further exacerbate women's exclusion and lack of agency. Based on the findings, the study proposes transformative strategies to enhance women's political leadership and engagement in internal decision-making and policy development to create the conditions for their meaningful contribution to peace in the region, starting from internal Palestinian reconciliation. These strategies include translating commitments such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security into actionable measures, dismantling patriarchal norms, fostering gender equality in public institutions and policies, and garnering political parties' support for the nomination of women for public office. Additionally, the study advocates for developing protection and accountability mechanisms within government institutions, reforming educational curricula to incorporate gender-sensitive content, and fostering collaborations among civil society organisations, local authorities, political parties, the media, decision-makers, and international stakeholders. The research analysis leads to a series of actionable recommendations directed at key stakeholders at the national level, including the Palestinian Authority, political parties, civil society organisations, and media entities. By integrating these recommendations into their policies and practice, the Palestinian national and local authorities would foster an enabling environment for women's active participation in negotiating peace.

1.0 Background

In 2022, the Palestinian Centre for Peace and Democracy (PCPD) conducted the research titled ***Empowering Palestinian Women's Active Political Participation: Key Findings from Youth-led Research,*** under the project *"Young Women and Men Engaging in Peace Negotiations within the Framework of UN Resolution 1325."* The project included capacity-building workshops and policy dialogues, and it was realised in collaboration with the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) and with the financial support of the United Nations Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund Rapid Response Window for Women's Participation in Peace Process.

The research study delved into how and why Palestinian women should advance their demands for meaningful participation in decision-making and peace processes between Israel and Palestine and intra-Palestinian reconciliation processes. It reflected a youth-led approach grounded on the premise that young people possess critical insights into the dynamics and complexities surrounding the inclusion of women in decision-making and peace processes. Further, it emphasised the importance of providing young people, in particular young women, with the opportunity to build a better future based on their vision of sustainable peace, which previous generations failed to establish.

The research was designed from the perspectives of the youth, and it led to the development of a series of recommendations for government actors, political parties, and civil society for the effective implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda in Palestine to enhance women's political leadership and active engagement in the peace processes. These recommendations encompass repositioning women's representation and participation at the forefront of the country's political agenda, dismantling harmful gender stereotypes and norms, and promoting gender equality throughout society to achieve lasting peace and development in Palestine.

2.0 Women, Peace, and Security: The Context in Palestine

2.1 At the Root of the Problem: Women's Absence from the Public Sphere

Women's political participation in Palestine reached its peak in the 1980s with the first Intifada when they played a <u>crucial role in political leadership</u> and joined men in protests against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, when the Palestinian National Authority was established in 1994, it was predominantly led by men with rigid conservative views on women's role in society. This reinforced harmful gender stereotypes and patriarchal values that continue to pervade the Palestinian socio-cultural fabric.

Today, <u>women make up half of the population in Palestine (49%)</u>. Despite global advancements in women's rights, Palestinian women face persistent challenges in participating politically at the national level. This is evident in the declining participation of women in the public sphere, which is closely linked to their systematic exclusion from the processes and the negotiations for reconciliation between the West Bank and Gaza political leadership.

Women's autonomy and decision-making power are severely limited within both private and public spheres. They are often portrayed as confined to traditional household roles, unpaid care, and child-rearing work, while men dominate the political and social spheres. Consequently, women's voices remain unheard in the public space, leaving them excluded from decision-making processes and peace negotiations that directly impact their lives.

The Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories compounds women's oppression and exclusion, alongside the existing patriarchal structures.[1]
Palestinian women bear the brunt of <u>restricted freedom of movement and association, land confiscations, and forced evictions</u> by the Israeli occupying authorities and illegal settlers. The Gaza blockade as well as the COVID-19 pandemic have taken a heavy toll on women by limiting their ability to <u>travel for work</u>, increasing risks of harassment by settlers and gender-based violence (GBV), and increasing rates of unemployment, particularly among young women. These challenges have further isolated women, limiting their participation in the political sphere and further disempowering their voices.

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[1] [Occupation, conflict and patriarchy: impacts on Palestinian women](#), P. Urrutia Arestizábal, Escola de Cultura de Pau, 2019

2.2 Taking a Step Forward: Palestine's National Action Plan on WPS

Against this backdrop, there is a strong commitment among Palestinian youth to build a more gender-equal society and enhance women's meaningful participation in political and peace processes.

Palestine formally acknowledged the importance of implementing the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) in 2005, reaffirming the crucial role of women in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and peace processes. In 2015, the Palestinian government launched its first National Action Plan (NAP) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). The NAP I aimed to protect women and girls from the impacts of Israeli occupation and conflict and increase their involvement in local and international decision-making processes.

Presently, Palestine is in the process of implementing its second WPS NAP for 2020-2024. The political and economic developments since NAP I have provided the opportunity to build on achievements and lessons generated and create space for new priorities, such as supporting women's leadership in the security sector and internal Palestinian dialogue and strengthening their resilience and participation in recovery and rehabilitation efforts.

However, despite these commitments, the effective implementation of the WPS Agenda is challenging, particularly in the context of peace negotiations. Since 2007, Palestinian women have been systematically excluded from the internal reconciliation attempts. As one indicator of this exclusion, the recent intra-Palestinian reconciliation effort in Cairo (2023) featured only one woman out of fifty-four negotiators. Achieving transformative change in Palestine requires translating commitments of the UNSCR 1325 and the WPS Agenda into tangible actions for women's meaningful inclusion in decision-making and peace processes. Without the full, equal, and meaningful inclusion of women, the pathway to just and sustainable peace in Palestine remains distant.

3.0 Methodology

The research adopted a blend of quantitative and qualitative methodologies to gauge public perception regarding women's role in the public sphere and develop a set of recommendations to enhance their participation in political decision-making and the peace process between Israel and Palestine, primarily focusing on intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts. The study employed a survey designed by Palestinian youth peace activists to explore the future prospects for Palestinian women's political participation. Questions covered various domains such as obstacles to women's political participation and gender equality institutions; strategies for government, civil society organisations, and other actors to promote women's political participation; and participation of women in negotiations with Israel and inter-Palestinian dialogue. Out of 1,466 questionnaires distributed across eleven West Bank governorates,[2] a representative sample of people across different areas of the West Bank, carefully selected based on age[3] and gender[4] criteria generated 1,308 fully completed questionnaires. Close to 75% of the respondents were youth between the ages of 18 to 32 years. Additionally, key informant interviews were conducted with three distinguished women leaders – Mrs Zahira Kamal[5], Dr Hanan Ashrawi[6], and Dr Laila Ghannam[7] – each of whom has significant experience in political decision-making and peace negotiations.

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[2] Hebron, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Ramallah, Nablus, Qalqiya, Tubas, Salfit, Jericho, Tulkarm, and Jenin.

[3] Between ages 18 and 50 years

[4] 62.8% female respondents and 37.2% male respondents

[5] Zahira Kamal, a prominent Palestinian politician was Minister of Women's Affairs from 2003 to 2006 and the secretary general of the Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA political party) prior to that. With six years of detention under town arrest from 1980 to 1986, Zahira is a resilient advocate for gender sensitivity, and human rights, and the founder of the Palestinian Federation of Women's Action Committees.

[6] Dr Hanan Ashrawi served as a member of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation's Executive Committee and was the official Spokesperson during the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference. She held the position of Minister of Higher Education and was elected to the Palestinian Legislative Council in 1996 and 2006. In 1994, Dr Ashrawi founded the Independent Commission for Human Rights, where she served as Commissioner-General until 1995. A key founder of civil society organisations such as MIFTAH and AMAN, Dr Ashrawi stands as the sole Palestinian woman who actively participated in negotiations with Israelis from the Madrid Conference in 1991 to 1993.

[7] Dr Layla Ghannam, the Ramallah-Al Bereh Governor since 2010, is both the youngest and only female governor of Ramallah and el-Bireh.

4.0 Key Findings

4.1 Interest and Level of Political Participation

While 36.3% of the respondents expressed strong interest in local political issues, even more, 39%, displayed no definite interest in political issues.[8] However, those with an interest cited contributing to political life by supporting civil society organisations and political parties and leveraging social media platforms to express their political opinions along with voting.

When asked about interest in participating in the inter-Palestine reconciliation processes, the majority of respondents' (31.3%) preferred being an observer in the process rather than an active participant or on the ground putting pressure on the contending parties (27.7%). Indeed, most respondents were aware of UNSCR 1325, however, they were lacking in awareness of its achievements in increasing women's political participation.

At the same time, the findings showed a positive trend in the increasing engagement and understanding of young people to influence political spaces and integrate themselves into local and national political processes through diverse channels of political action. There is a clear need to continue this trend: to increase the interest of Palestinian youth in public policymaking, as it holds the potential to generate momentum for the meaningful inclusion of women in political spheres and peace processes. The involvement of young people in politics can serve as a catalyst for transformative change if relevant stakeholders work for it.

4.2 Obstacles to Women's Political Participation

Most survey respondents, 79.6%, described the predominant obstacle to women's rights and inclusion as stemming from Israel's occupation policies such as repression, killing, seizure, and confiscation of land and settlement. The prevailing environment of oppression and intimidation under occupation instilled fear, especially in women, hindering their political activism and demand for democratic representation.

The majority of the respondents (66.5%) also believed that the constitutional provisions perpetuate gender biases and inequalities between men and women, further compounding the entrenched patriarchal notions in society. This includes the absence of a supportive environment for women in civil institutions (64.7%) and discrimination in legislation against women (67.7%) such as the absence of family law in Palestine and contradicting Jordanian[9] and British[10] Penal Codes in the West Bank and Gaza. All of these factors, respondents agreed, undermine the Palestinian Authority's efforts to combat violence against women such as the Council of Ministers Resolution to Improve the Protection of Women Subjected to Violence (2005) and the Presidential Decree ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All

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[8] The total percentage may not add up to 100% due to the inclusion of other response options. In the survey, 25% of respondents selected alternative choices not reflected in the presented data.
[9] Jordanian Penal Code No. 16 of 1960, applicable in the West Bank.
[10] British Penal Code No. 47 of 1936, applicable in the Gaza Strip.

Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 2009.

A significant number of respondents, 75.9%, described the freezing of the Palestinian electoral process, the unwillingness of political parties, and the absence of local government strategies supporting their participation in elections as barriers to women's political engagement. Respondents also referenced economic challenges, saying that capitalist companies prefer to employ men over women and that this undermines women's capacity to participate in politics. Indeed, according to the [Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2022,](#) the unemployment rate for women reached 40% compared to 20% for men. Women's lack of resources makes active political involvement such as running for election extremely difficult.

Despite these structural obstacles for women, 69.3% of the respondents identified women themselves as a significant hindrance to their political participation. The study suggests that this reluctance is likely rooted in the significant sociocultural and economic barriers women must overcome, including support from the family, to participate in politics.

4.3 Strategies for Enhancing Women's Political Participation

In light of the challenges that limit women's political participation, the study has identified several key strategies aimed at promoting and facilitating women's active involvement in the public domain [Figure 1]. These strategies may help overcome societal barriers and empower women to take an active role in shaping their communities and the wider political landscape.

More respondents, 83.5%, indicated the government should develop and adopt transitional mechanisms to support women's participation in political decision-making processes to follow up on the commitment to 30% quota for women as decided by the Palestinian National Council and felt that the government should also develop and adopt accountability mechanisms (77.3%). Similarly, many respondents, 76.5%, indicated that the government needs to ensure a gender-sensitive work environment based on a commitment to achieve gender equality within public institutions and policies.

Additionally, 68.8% agreed that the government's adoption and implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Palestine through NAP was a crucial strategy to develop protection mechanisms for women and girls and to increase their participation in peace-making and conflict resolution efforts. Such participation would include integrating women into decision-making processes and incorporating their views into the reconciliation process, according to the objectives of UNSCR 1325.
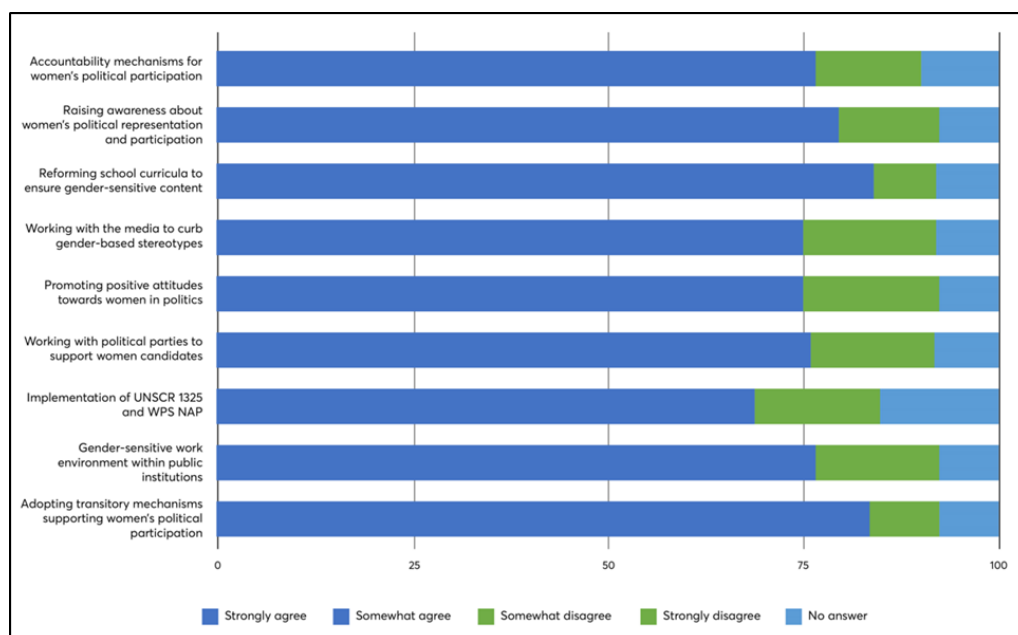
Figure 1: Participants' Support for Strategies to Promote Women's Political Participation

Participants recognise that addressing the lack of supportive institutional structures to foster women's meaningful inclusion extends beyond politicians and decision-makers. Three key actors, namely civil society organisations (CSOs), the education system, and the local public media were identified as pivotal contributors to promoting gender equality and inclusivity in Palestine.

Most respondents, 76%, concurred that CSOs must work with political parties to support the nomination of women for public office. Respondents generally indicated they understand CSOs' instrumental role in shaping positive attitudes in society towards women in politics. According to the respondents, Palestinian CSOs (such as the PCPD) are a beacon for gender equality and women's participation, working relentlessly to contrast the retreat of democratic values in the country. They conduct the critical work of training young people to become leaders committed to fostering inclusivity and peace in Palestine.

The relevant stakeholders must recognise and reinforce the pivotal role of civil society through collaboration with the local authorities, national decision-makers, and international stakeholders alike. This collaboration is imperative for amplifying the impact of civil society initiatives and effecting meaningful change in attitudes toward women's political participation.

Similarly, to the civil society sector, the education system holds a significant role in shaping gender relations and social norms in Palestine. The current education system reinforces gender norms that place women in subordinate roles compared to men. From early on, children are imparted notions that confine women to domestic roles, perpetuating gender biases.

To counteract gender biases, a substantial majority of respondents (84.1%) advocate for a fundamental shift in the education sector and evince a strong inclination towards reforming education curricula. This includes gender-sensitive content and textbooks that break gender stereotypes and present positive gender norms and socialisation. Gender-sensitive school curricula create an inclusive and respectful learning environment, empowering students to challenge gender stereotypes, embrace diversity, and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Furthermore, public media serves as a critical stakeholder in shaping public opinion on gender relations in Palestine. A significant 75.1% of young respondents emphasise the need for Palestinian CSOs to collaborate with local media to curb sexist, gender-based stereotypes and foster women's political participation. This collaboration could extend to awareness-raising campaigns that promote women's political representation and participation, a strategy 79.6% of respondents supported. This joint effort holds the potential to dismantle gender stereotypes and contribute to a more inclusive and informed society.

4.4 The Participation of Palestinian Women in Negotiations Within Inter-Palestine and Palestine-Israel

While the respondents acknowledged the multifaceted barriers limiting women's access to decision-making spaces, a close examination of the reasons behind women's almost complete exclusion from the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations revealed that most attributed it to political leadership's deliberate exclusion of women, but some felt that women did not apply to participate in the negotiations or lack negotiation skills [Figure 2]. A small segment of the respondents, 5%, understand women's exclusion as a significant contributing factor to the failure of both Palestinian-Israeli negotiations and the inter-Palestinian dialogue.
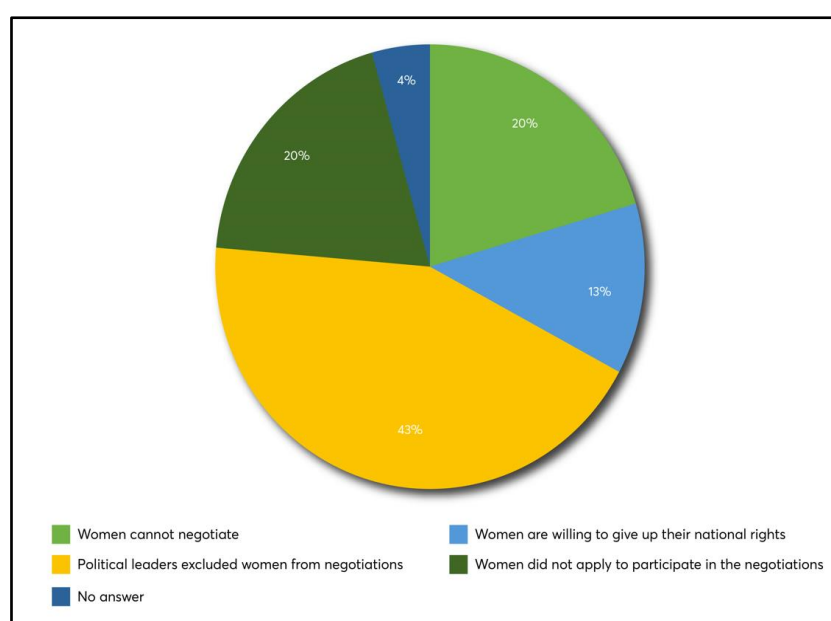
Figure 2: Causes of Women's Absence from Palestinian-Israel Negotiations

The most-cited reason for women's exclusion from inter-Palestine was patriarchal gender stereotypes in politics, although 22.5% of the respondents believed that women did not apply to participate in negotiations. [Figure 3].
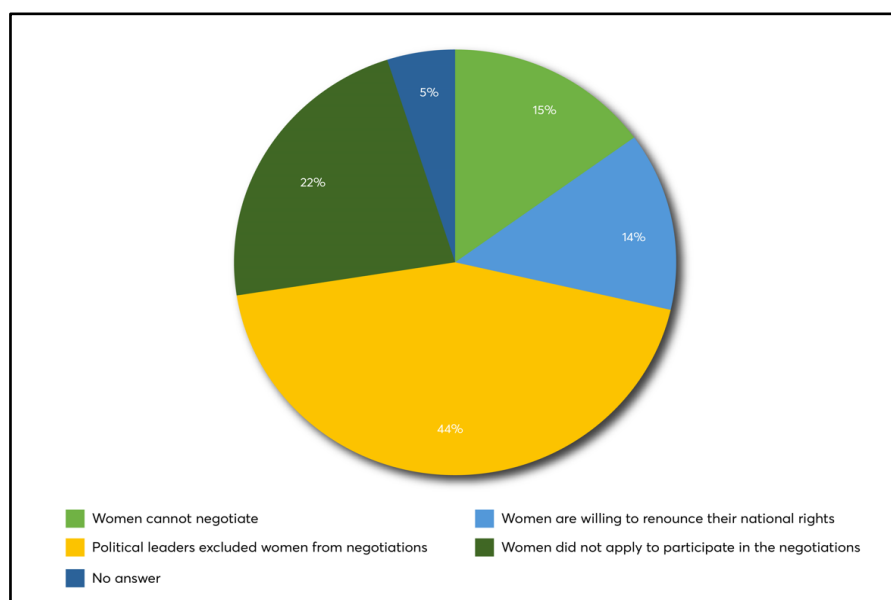

Figure 3: Causes of Women's Absence from Inter-Palestine Negotiations

These findings suggest that, despite the widespread recognition that unequal power relations contribute to women's exclusion from the political decision-making and peace processes, deeply entrenched patriarchal and misogynistic beliefs persist in a big part of the population. Over 50% of the people who responded to the survey ascribed the cause of exclusion to women's lack of agency. In that vein, lasting peace and stability in Palestine can only be achieved if women become active agents for change, both in peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine and within intra-Palestinian reconciliation processes.

In light of the study's findings, it is crucial to recognise and amplify the importance of women's participation in the negotiations between Palestine and Israel and in inter-Palestinian dialogues. The compelling data underscores the need for a transformative shift in perspectives - one that involves the comprehension of the UNSCR 1325 and the Palestinian WPS NAP. It is also necessary to acknowledge, strengthen, and amplify women's unique and intersectional perspectives, needs, and abilities to contribute to change at local, national, regional, and international levels.

5.0 The Way Forward

There is an immediate need to radically reshape perspectives and attitudes towards Palestinian women and to recognise their exceptional capability to fulfil vital political roles, formulate governmental decisions, and make meaningful contributions towards reaching peace. Concurrently, the active involvement of women in decision-making and policy development is essential for fostering substantive change within the Palestinian socio-political system.

To achieve this, governmental institutions, political parties, and policymakers must collaborate with civil society and feminist organisations to eradicate the root causes of gender inequality and ensure women's active engagement at all levels of political and peace processes in Palestine.

The following recommendations based on the findings are offered to guide key stakeholders in realising these transformative objectives:

Palestinian Authority

The Palestinian Authority has the responsibility to implement its commitments to the WPS agenda reiterated in NAPs. Concretely, the Palestinian Authority should:

1. Implement its commitments stated in the NAP on WPS by
   - localising the provisions of the WPS Agenda to ensure that its principles are effectively integrated into the national context and
   - collaborating with CSOs, particularly women-led CSOs, to promote and implement the WPS Agenda.
2. Support its vision for gender equality by
   - developing a comprehensive and actionable strategy and taking action to transform gender-biased public policies and
   - striving for equal representation of women in decision-making processes, ensuring their voices are heard and considered.
3. Promote equitable representation by
   - advocating for policies that include quota systems in support of women, addressing existing imbalances in institutions such as: local governments, political parties' leadership, and in the Palestinian parliament, and
   - designing and implementing measures that positively impact social attitudes towards gender equality, challenging stereotypes and fostering inclusivity.
4. Amend the legal system by
   - addressing gender disparities within the legal system and promoting justice and fairness for all and
   - designing and implementing accountability mechanisms to ensure that women and men receive equal and fair treatment before the law.
5. Foster institutional gender equality by
   - developing and implementing internal policies within governmental institutions that foster gender equality and
   - establishing accountability mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating progress in achieving institutional gender equality goals.

6. Initiate a fundamental shift in the education system by
    - developing a gender-sensitive curriculum, incorporating content that addresses gender issues sensitively and presents positive gender norms and socialization, and
    - cultivating an educational environment that challenges stereotypes and encourages critical thinking on gender roles.

Political Parties

The political parties have the responsibility to support women's participation in politics and provide them with the means necessary to access resources. Concretely, political parties should:

1. Prioritise women's political participation by
    - incorporating women's participation as a central theme in their agendas and
    - making public commitments to creating inclusive spaces for women within the party structures and activities.
2. Support women candidates in elections by
    - developing and implementing election strategies that support and promote women candidates and
    - investing in capacity-building programs for women, equipping them with the skills and resources needed for successful political engagement.
3. Enhance women's agency by
    - implementing empowerment initiatives that focus on enhancing the agency of women both individually and within collective work and
    - ensuring administrative structures within political parties promote and value the contributions of women.

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

CSOs have the responsibility to collaborate with local authorities, national decision-makers, and international stakeholders to bring meaningful change in attitudes toward women's participation in politics and peace processes. Concretely, CSOs should:

1. Empower women within leadership structures by
    - prioritising capacity development programs that empower women within organisational contexts and
    - working towards creating inclusive leadership structures within CSOs.
2. Collaborate with decision-makers by
    - engaging in advocacy initiatives with local decision-makers on policies that ensure women's meaningful participation and
    - garnering international support for women's active engagement in political and reconciliation processes in Palestine, and the peace process between Palestine and Israel when it resumes.

3. Investigate women's role by
    - undertaking research initiatives to investigate and highlight the significant role of women in decision-making at all levels and
    - utilising research findings to advocate for increased women's inclusion in decision-making processes
4. Strengthen women's agency by
    - establishing mentorship programs that focus on strengthening the agency and decision-making capabilities of young women in their public roles and
    - providing skill-strengthening initiatives to empower young women to navigate and succeed in the public sphere.
5. Influence the creation of an enabling environment for women's participation by
    - engaging in public awareness campaigns to influence the creation of positive attitudes and challenge gender stereotypes towards women in politics and
    - working together with political parties to support the nomination of women within their structures.
6. Collaborate with the media by
    - partnering to raise awareness of women's political representation through joint campaigns and
    - collaborating with local media outlets to dismantle gender stereotypes.

The Media

The media plays a major role in shaping public opinion and it has a responsibility to contribute to gender equality in Palestine. Concretely, the media should:

1. Establish collaborative platforms between CSOs and local media outlets by
    - discussing emerging issues, sharing best practices, and refining strategies to counter gender stereotypes effectively and
    - facilitating joint initiatives to address and counteract sexist and gender-based stereotypes through awareness campaigns.
2. Promote women's political representation by
    - encouraging local media to engage in awareness-raising campaigns promoting women's political participation and representation and
    - dismantling stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive and informed society.
3. Build journalists' capacity to support gender equality by
    - developing training programs for journalists within local media outlets to enhance their understanding of gender-sensitive reporting.
    - helping journalists navigate complex gender issues responsibly and to contribute to a more nuanced and accurate portrayal of women in politics.
4. Establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track its progress on gender equality by
    - assessing the impact of collaborative efforts between CSOs and local media to generate insights into the effectiveness of awareness campaigns and
    - enabling adjustments to strategies and ensuring sustained progress toward

dismantling gender stereotypes and enhancing women's political participation.

These recommendations collectively form a comprehensive framework for stakeholders to undertake actions that will contribute to the transformative change necessary to ensure women's meaningful participation in political and peace processes in Palestine. The effective implementation of these recommendations has the potential to take significant strides toward achieving a future marked by increased political engagement for all women, thereby contributing to lasting peace and development in the region.