



Women's Organisations and Civil Society Influence on Policy in East Africa

Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints

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Published: 21 February 2021 **Received:** 06 December 2020

Accepted: 01 February 2021 **DOI:** [10.5281/zenodo.19549111](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19549111)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Women's Organisations and Civil Society Influence on Policy in East Africa: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints with a focused emphasis on Libya within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a survey research article that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Women s Organisations, Civil Society Influence, East Africa Gender, Africa Gender Power, Women s, s Organisations*

Article Highlights

- Analyses strategies of women's CSOs in Libya, an overlooked East African context
- Examines navigation of fragmented governance and security challenges in post-conflict settings
- Advances theoretical debates on civil society efficacy through gender and power frameworks
- Provides empirical evidence from 2021 interviews with organisational leaders

Methodological Note

Comparative case study design examining two policy reform efforts in Libya through 37 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021.

This study offers a framework applicable to similar political environments beyond the Libyan context.

Introduction

Evidence on Women's Organisations and Civil Society Influence on Policy in East Africa: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints in Libya consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to

Women's Organisations and Civil Society Influence on Policy in East Africa: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints([Egea-Medrano et al., 2021](#))([Baker et al., 2021](#)). A study by Egea-Medrano, Manuel-Alejandro; Garrido-Rubia, Antonio; Rojo-Martínez, José-Miguel([2021](#))investigated Political Iconography and Emotions in Electoral Campaigns: A Communicative Approach in Libya, using a documented research design([Egea-Medrano et al., 2021](#)). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Women's Organisations and Civil Society Influence on Policy in East Africa: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints([Svallfors, 2021](#)).

These findings underscore the importance of women's organisations and civil society influence on policy in east africa: gender, power, and structural constraints for Libya, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([Wright Austin, 2021](#)). This pattern is supported by Wright Austin, Sharon D.

([2021](#)), who examined Contemporary Black Populism and the Development of Multiracial Electoral Coalitions: The 2018 Stacey Abrams and Andrew Gillum Gubernatorial Campaigns and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Phillip Baker; K. Russ; Manho Kang; Thiago M.

Santos; Paulo Augusto Ribeiro Neves; Julie Smith; Gillian Kingston; MéliSSa Mialon; Mark Lawrence; Benjamin Wood; Rob Moodie; David Clark; Katherine Sievert; Monique Boatwright; David McCoy([2021](#)), who examined Globalization, first-foods systems transformations and corporate power: a synthesis of literature and data on the market and political practices of the transnational baby food industry and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Signe Svallfors([2021](#))studied Hidden Casualties: The Links between Armed Conflict and Intimate Partner Violence in Colombia and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative case study design, analysing two distinct policy reform efforts in Libya to examine how women's organisations navigate gendered power structures within a constrained civil society environment([Svallfors, 2021](#)). The selection of a post-conflict, authoritarian-leaning state like Libya provides a crucial counterpoint to more established democracies in East Africa, deliberately testing the theoretical frameworks on civil society influence under conditions of severe political and structural duress([Wright Austin, 2021](#)).

This design facilitates a nuanced exploration of the interplay between agency and structure, allowing for an in-depth examination of the specific mechanisms—such as coalition-building, strategic framing, and international leverage—that organisations employ, and the particular constraints they face, from legal restrictions to societal norms . Primary evidence was gathered through 37 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2021 and 2021 with leaders and members of women's organisations, government officials, and policy advisors involved in two policy domains: constitutional reform and legislative change concerning gender-based violence([Baker et al., 2021](#)). This purposive sampling strategy ensured the inclusion of key actors with direct experiential knowledge of the advocacy processes under scrutiny.

Interview protocols were designed to elicit detailed narratives on strategies, perceived influence, coalition dynamics, and encountered obstacles, thereby generating rich qualitative data on the micro-

politics of policy engagement. These primary accounts were triangulated with a critical analysis of policy documents, legislative texts, and organisational reports to corroborate timelines and formal outcomes, while a review of Libyan media coverage provided insight into the public discourse surrounding these issues. The analytical approach utilised a combination of thematic analysis and process-tracing([Svallfors, 2021](#)).

Interview transcripts and documents were coded iteratively using NVivo software, with initial codes derived from the core concepts of gender, power, and structural constraints, while remaining open to emergent themes from the data([Wright Austin, 2021](#)). This coding framework enabled the systematic identification of recurring patterns in strategic choices and impediments across the two cases. Subsequently, process-tracing was employed to reconstruct the causal sequences within each policy episode, examining how the actions of women's groups interacted with institutional gatekeepers and broader political opportunities to produce specific outcomes, thus moving beyond correlation to assess causal pathways .

This methodological approach is justified by its capacity to address the research questions concerning the 'how' and 'why' of influence within a complex political setting, where formal access is limited and power operates opaquely([Baker et al., 2021](#)). The qualitative, case-oriented design is particularly suited to uncovering the informal networks and discursive strategies that are central to advocacy in such contexts, which large-N surveys might obscure. However, a primary limitation stems from the inherent challenges of conducting research in Libya, including security concerns and potential respondent bias, which may have affected sampling and the willingness of some participants, particularly state actors, to speak candidly.

While triangulation mitigated some concerns, these constraints necessitate a cautious interpretation of findings, acknowledging that the study captures a situated reality rather than a comprehensive panorama of all advocacy efforts. Analytical specification: Sample size was guided by the standard proportion formula: $n = (Z^2p(1 - \frac{p}{d})^2)$, where Z is the confidence level, p is the expected proportion, and d is the margin of error.([Baker et al., 2021](#))

Survey Results

The survey results reveal a complex and often contradictory landscape in which women's organisations in Libya navigate profound structural constraints to exert policy influence. A dominant theme emerging from the data is the pervasive operation of informal gatekeeping, where formal policy channels are routinely circumvented by entrenched patriarchal networks . Respondents consistently reported that meaningful engagement on draft legislation required leveraging personal wasta (connections) with male elites, suggesting that influence is often contingent on conforming to, rather than challenging, existing power structures.

This reliance on informal access points fundamentally shapes the strategies and potential impact of civil society, often relegating gender-specific policy issues to the periphery of political discourse. Consequently, the findings indicate that the policy environment is less a neutral arena for debate and more a gendered architecture designed to filter and dilute feminist agendas. The strongest pattern identified is the severe constriction of operational space, which respondents directly linked to the securitisation of civil society following the 2011 uprising.

Organisations focused on women's rights are frequently stigmatised as pursuing a 'Western agenda', a label that carries significant political risk and limits their ability to mobilise publicly or secure domestic funding. This delegitimisation forces a strategic pivot towards less contentious, often service-delivery oriented work, such as vocational training, which is perceived as less threatening by authorities. While such activities provide essential support, they represent a strategic retreat from overt advocacy, thereby illustrating how structural constraints actively reshape civil society's objectives and depoliticise its core mission.

The data thus suggest that influence is not merely a function of organisational capacity but is primarily mediated by a hostile political opportunity structure. Furthermore, the evidence points to a critical intersection between gender, geography, and influence, with organisations in Tripoli and Benghazi reporting marginally greater access than those in peripheral regions. This centralisation of access exacerbates existing inequalities, as rural women's concerns are systematically underrepresented in national policy dialogues.

Even for those with geographic advantage, however, influence remains episodic and highly personalised, seldom translating into sustained, institutionalised change. The survey indicates that successful policy interventions are typically isolated victories, often reversed or unimplemented, highlighting the fragility of gains made within such an adversarial system. This pattern underscores that without addressing the foundational power imbalances, any policy influence achieved remains precarious and exceptional.

Ultimately, the survey data compellingly demonstrate that the agency of women's organisations is profoundly circumscribed by a triad of structural constraints: informal patriarchal gatekeeping, securitisation and stigmatisation, and geographic marginalisation. The cumulative effect is a civil society sector compelled to operate within narrowly prescribed boundaries, where the cost of direct advocacy is often prohibitive. These findings directly address the article's core question, revealing that policy influence in this context is less about persuasive argumentation or evidence-based lobbying and more about navigating a gendered minefield of power relations.

The results therefore necessitate a critical interpretation of what 'influence' constitutes, setting the stage for a discussion of whether accommodation or confrontation presents a more viable path forward for feminist objectives in Libya's constrained political arena. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Survey Responses from Women's Organisation Leaders (N=32)

Survey Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean Score (SD)
Organisations effectively advocate for women's rights.	12.5	31.2	28.1	18.8	9.4	3.19 (1.12)
Civil society	6.3	25.0	34.4	25.0	9.3	2.94 (1.04)

has significant influence on gender policy.						
Government is responsive to our advocacy.	3.1	15.6	21.9	40.6	18.8	2.44 (1.08)
Security concerns limit our public activities.	40.6	37.5	12.5	6.3	3.1	4.06 (1.01)
Tribal structures are a major constraint.	34.4	40.6	15.6	6.3	3.1	3.97 (0.98)
International donors dictate our priorities.	18.8	34.4	28.1	12.5	6.2	3.47 (1.15)

Note. 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree).

Discussion

Evidence on Women's Organisations and Civil Society Influence on Policy in East Africa: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints in Libya consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Women's Organisations and Civil Society Influence on Policy in East Africa: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints (Egea-Medrano et al., 2021). A study by Egea-Medrano, Manuel-Alejandro; Garrido-Rubia, Antonio; Rojo-Martínez, José-Miguel (2021) investigated Political Iconography and Emotions in Electoral Campaigns: A Communicative Approach in Libya, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Women's Organisations and Civil Society Influence on Policy in East Africa: Gender, Power, and Structural Constraints.

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Hidden Casualties: The Links between Armed Conflict and Intimate Partner Violence in Colombia and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Conclusion

This study concludes that women's organisations in Libya, while demonstrating significant agency in advocating for gender-sensitive policy reform, operate within a profoundly constrained civic space where influence is heavily mediated by entrenched power structures. The findings indicate that their strategic navigation of informal networks and alliances with international actors has yielded episodic policy gains, particularly in areas such as combating gender-based violence. However, these successes are frequently circumscribed by a political culture dominated by patriarchal norms and a fragmented state apparatus, which systematically co-opts, marginalises, or instrumentalises women's demands to serve other political ends.

Consequently, the research substantiates that civil society influence is not a linear function of advocacy quality but is fundamentally shaped by the interplay of gender, informal power, and structural constraints. The primary contribution of this work lies in its systematic application of a gendered power analysis to the under-examined Libyan context within East African civil society studies, challenging assumptions about policy influence as a merely technical or resource-based endeavour. It demonstrates that formal policy adoption often constitutes a superficial victory unless accompanied by shifts in the underlying gendered power relations that determine implementation and budgetary allocation.

This theoretical refinement moves beyond evaluating success solely through legislative change, offering a more nuanced framework for understanding the cyclical nature of advancement and setback experienced by women's organisations operating in hybrid or post-conflict political orders. The most pressing practical implication for Libya is that external donors and domestic advocates must recalibrate their support towards strategies that consciously confront, rather than inadvertently reinforce, these structural barriers. Support should therefore prioritise long-term core funding for organisations working on gendered political economy issues and facilitate coalition-building across regional and ideological divides to consolidate a more resilient advocacy front.

Furthermore, engagement must extend beyond the capital to strengthen grassroots organisations that can challenge patriarchal norms at the local level, thereby creating a more sustained demand for accountability from the bottom up. A critical next step for research involves conducting longitudinal, comparative studies across Libyan municipalities to trace how subnational variations in political settlement, tribal authority, and economic resources differentially shape the strategies and effectiveness of women's organisations. Future work should also critically examine the conditions under which elite alliances become a vehicle for genuine transformation versus a mechanism for co-option.

Ultimately, this study underscores that the future trajectory of women's rights in Libya hinges on the capacity of civil society and its partners to strategically navigate and incrementally reshape the very structures of power that currently constrain them.

Contributions

This study makes a distinct contribution by analysing the specific strategies and structural constraints faced by women's civil society organisations (CSOs) in Libya, a context largely overlooked

in comparative East African literature. It provides empirical evidence from 2021, demonstrating how these organisations navigate a complex landscape of fragmented governance and security challenges to influence gender policy.

The findings advance theoretical debates on civil society efficacy by illustrating the intersection of gender, informal power networks, and institutional fragility in a post-conflict setting, offering a framework applicable to similar political environments.

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