

Anti-Corruption Through Women's Leadership: New Avenues for Euro-Arab Cooperation

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Introduction

Corruption remains a significant barrier to good governance, economic stability, and social equity across both Europe and the Arab countries, draining public resources and undermining institutional trust. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2023, the European Union (EU) maintains an average CPI score of 65/100. Meanwhile, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region scored an average of 34/100, reflecting an increase in perceived corruption compared to 39 in the previous year (Transparency International, 2024). These scores indicate that Arab countries continue to experience high levels of public sector corruption, undermining governance and development, and suggest that the EU could be a relevant partner when addressing this challenge.

The impact of corruption is not evenly distributed. Women, particularly those in low-income and marginalized communities, suffer disproportionately due to systemic barriers and gendered corruption practices such as sextortion, restricted access to justice, and biased political exclusion (UNODC, 2020). According to Transparency International 74% of Europeans believe that sextortion occurs at least occasionally (Transparency International, 2021). Similarly, a study in Lebanon, Tunisia, and Jordan revealed that 23% of respondents had either experienced or knew someone who had been a victim of sextortion, with women being the primary targets (Transparency International, 2020).



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Growing evidence suggests that strengthening women's participation in governance can help counteract these harms. Across both Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, research points to lower corruption levels when women hold leadership positions in local councils, parliaments, and corporate boards. This paper examines the gendered dimensions of corruption, highlights the role of women as anticorruption actors, and outlines policy measures to strengthen women's leadership in both Europe and the Arab world and as part of their cross-regional cooperation agenda.

The Gendered Face of Corruption

Corruption is not gender neutral. While it harms entire societies, it tends to affect women in distinct and disproportionate ways. In many contexts, women particularly those responsible for managing family needs encounter bribe demands when accessing essential services such as healthcare, school enrolment, and licensing (UNDP-UNIFEM, 2010). These transactions are not always monetary: in some cases, officials exploit gendered power dynamics through sextortion, demanding sexual favors in exchange for public services or legal documents. Because this form of abuse remains deeply underreported, perpetrators often act with impunity.

Gendered corruption extends beyond sextortion. Women are frequently excluded from political participation due to corrupt electoral practices and gender-based intimidation. They are disproportionately harmed by the embezzlement of public funds which diverts resources from social assistance. In the workplace bribery and coercion can block women's career advancement or force them into precarious employment. As primary caregivers and regular users of social services, women often engage with public institutions in sectors particularly vulnerable to corruption, such as healthcare, education, and social services.

Addressing these gender-specific vulnerabilities requires tailored anti-corruption strategies that go beyond generic reforms. Stronger legal protections, targeted enforcement mechanisms, and inclusive policy design are essential to ensure women can access rights and services without fear of exploitation or exclusion.

Why Women's Leadership Matters

Cross-national research shows a consistent pattern: when women win real authority in public life, corruption measurably declines (Dollar, Fisman, & Gatti, 2001; Bauhr, Charron, & Wängnerud, 2019). Spanish evidence offers fiscal evidence: municipalities headed by women especially those with gender-balanced councils, exhibited greater budget stability and were less likely to engage in opportunistic fiscal policies (Balaguer-Coll & Ivanova-Toneva, 2021). Numbers, though, feel abstract until we meet the women behind them, leaders who have fought corruption in ways that look impressively similar whether they sit in Bucharest or Beirut.

Take Laura Codruța Kövesi. As chief of Romania's National Anti-Corruption Directorate, she turned what many saw as a merely symbolic agency into a force that convicted more than a thousand officials, including the former prime minister. Kövesi posted case statistics online, published evidence summaries, and invited journalists to scrutinize her team's work making back-room pressures painfully public. When Romanian politicians pushed her out, the European Union hired her as its first chief prosecutor, confirming how effective extreme transparency can be (European Public Prosecutor's Office, 2022; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2019).

A similar playbook appears in Lebanon. Judge Ghada Aoun, former public prosecutor for Mount Lebanon, launched bold investigations into powerful actors, filing money-laundering charges against several big banks and pursuing the former central-bank governor Riad Salameh for illicit enrichment (Reuters, 2023). Aoun livestreamed raids and released court filings, betting that public visibility would deter interference. She also faced fierce criticism, not only from the banking elite but from many who argued she was too closely aligned with a major political party. Her dismissal by a disciplinary panel drew condemnation from international legal groups, which called it a blow to judicial independence (International Commission of Jurists, 2023). Supporters and critics alike agree on one point: her actions forced unprecedented scrutiny of Lebanon's financial establishment.

Across the Mediterranean, Eva Joly, the French-Norwegian magistrate who cracked the Elf-Aquitaine oil scandal spent years tracing bribes through shell companies, then handed her findings to investigative reporters and



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parliamentary committees. Her relentless paper trail sent oil executives and political fixers to prison and pushed France to tighten corporate-governance rules (Transparency International, 2003; Joly, 2006).

Further south, Yemeni journalist-activist Tawakkol Karman exposed off-the-books oil revenues feeding President Ali Abdullah Saleh's patronage machine. By pairing documentation with street-level protests, she helped bring down the regime and became the first Arab woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize (Karman, 2011; Nobel Prize, 2011).

Four stories, four different job titles yet the methods overlap. Each leader chose radical openness: Kövesi's statistics, Aoun's livestreams, Joly's court files, Karman's investigative reports. Each built coalitions that reached beyond traditional power circles: EU prosecutors, banking whistle-blowers, investigative journalists, and grassroots protesters. And each relied on the formal safeguards of her role prosecutorial mandate, judicial tenure, magistrate's authority, or press freedom to push back when backlash came.

Put simply, the evidence and the lived experience converge. Where women occupy mayoral offices, legislative committees, prosecution units, or newsrooms, corruption finds it harder to hide. The lesson for Euro-Arab reformers is straightforward: expanding women's access to leadership is more than a fairness goal; it is a proven strategy for cleaner, more accountable government.

A Phased Roadmap for Gender-Responsive Anti-Corruption Reform

Building on clear evidence that women's leadership curbs corruption, reformers in Europe and the Arab world can advance through **three strategic phases**: establishing legal foundations, consolidating institutional accountability, and embedding gender-sensitive practices in long-term development and post-conflict reconstruction. Sequencing measures this way lets countries with different starting points move at a realistic pace while converging on the same goal: transparent governance shaped and monitored by women.

Stage 1 – Legal Foundations and Early Cooperation

The first step is clarity. Laws that label sextortion explicitly as corruption create firm grounds for investigation and prosecution, while statutory gender quotas set at 30–40 percent for parliaments, councils, and procurement boards, open leadership channels that historically excluded women. Dialogue can start in regional forums where legislators compare draft bills and civil society leaders share survivor testimonies. A newly elected Lebanese council might invite Spanish counterparts, whose gender-balanced committees already run transparent budget hearings, to demonstrate how quotas translate into day-to-day oversight. Such encounters show that reform is feasible and generate peer pressure on governments still in the discussion phase.

Stage 2 – Institutional Accountability and Skills Building

Once legal framework is in place, enforcement architecture must follow. Whistleblower statutes tailored to women's specific risks, blacklisting, online harassment, workplace retaliation need well-advertised hotlines and trusted NGO partners who can guide complainants. Gender units inside audit chambers or ombudsperson offices ensure sextortion files are handled by staff trained to protect both evidence and dignity. This phase also deepens talent pipelines: scholarships, cross-regional mentorships, and gender-sensitive curricula in civil service colleges supply the auditors, prosecutors, and budget controllers who keep the system honest.

Stage 3 – Regional Synergy, Reconstruction, and Community Ownership

Maturing institutions need reinforcement through wider alliances and grassroots vigilance. Twinning arrangements, for example, Barcelona with Beirut can pilot digitized procurement portals or budget-tracking apps; online repositories capture successes and lessons so Amman or Rabat can adapt them. International donors then link reconstruction funds to visible commitments: a finance ministry hiring women auditors and reserving seats for them on truth-commission panels finds it easier to unlock EU or Gulf grants. At village level, women-run cooperatives monitor school-repair contracts or water budgets, posting monthly ledgers on community boards; local transparency sustains national reforms.



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The **Pact for the Mediterranean**, now moving toward adoption within the EU, adds timely leverage here by offering a cross-border framework for integrity and sustainable development cooperation; governments can fold these gender-responsive anticorruption measures into the pact's planned funding and monitoring instruments, ensuring that Mediterranean projects meet both transparency and equality benchmarks from the outset.

Seeing reforms as a phased journey: legal clarity first, institutional capacity next, and region-wide consolidation last, governments and civil society can align ambition with practical sequencing. Early movers gain quick wins that justify deeper change; slower systems adopt entry-level measures without overcommitting; conflict-affected states weave integrity into peace talks rather than bolting it on later. Throughout every phase, women's leadership remains the organizing principle and the clearest signal that anti-corruption promises are becoming reality.

Conclusion

Corruption in the Euro-Arab cooperation agenda continues to divert vital public resources, weaken institutional trust, and disproportionately harm women particularly in areas such as political participation, access to basic services, and financial inclusion. Feminine leadership and activism, whether in legislative bodies or community-level organizations, have already made a tangible difference by revealing irregularities, tightening legal frameworks, and shaping innovative reforms. Their efforts proof that bringing more women into the policymaking and oversight process can reduce avenues for bribery, nepotism, and sextortion while improving responsiveness to citizens' needs.

Success stories from entrepreneurship and peacebuilding are powerful reminders that progress is both needed and possible. Extending this inclusive, problem-solving ethos into multilateral and cross-regional anticorruption strategies offers a promising path toward more equitable and transparent governance. European and Arab states could work together in sharing experiences on criminalizing sextortion, instituting quotas, or strengthening whistleblower protections. This agenda of cooperation aligns with recognized global standards like SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Strong Institutions) that both European and Arab countries have endorsed and committed to achieve. Overall, working together to foster women's roles in anticorruption initiatives could further strengthen and diversify Euro-Arab cooperation while renewing their joint commitment with multilateralism.



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El Hiwar project

El Hiwar III is an EU-funded project implemented by the College of Europe (Bruges, Belgium). It designs, organises and facilitates a series of activities with the aim of building capacity, contributing to information exchange and interactions between the EU and the LAS. These activities take various formats, such as policy dialogues, summer schools, training programmes, policy briefs, etc.

The League of Arab States is a central partner in the stabilisation of the region and the main institutional interlocutor with the Arab world. At the first EU-LAS summit in Sharm El-Sheikh (Egypt) on 24-25 February 2019, the leaders agreed to deepen Arab-European ties to enhance the stability, prosperity, and well-being of the two regions. Both sides agreed to boost cooperation towards security, conflict resolution and socio-economic development throughout the region. Leaders also reaffirmed the need to strengthen economic cooperation between the two regions to spur investment and sustainable growth. The summit in Egypt marked the start of a new dialogue between the EU and the LAS. Leaders committed to hold EU-LAS summits regularly.

This project is designed to reinforce the dialogue and cooperation with the League of Arab States.

El Hiwar III aims to contribute to the implementation of the EU-LAS Joint Work Programme on information and training, complementing the formal EU-LAS activities taking place outside of El Hiwar (e.g. Ministerial and PSC meetings, other political exchanges with EU-LAS counterparts, EU-LAS Strategic Dialogue).

Whenever relevant, El Hiwar III can provide inputs for the preparation of formal EU-LAS relations meetings (e.g. preparation of policy briefs) or for the implementation of decisions made during Ministerial meetings, summits, etc. Likewise, El Hiwar III can provide inputs in the framework of relevant multilateral events.

El Hiwar III also aims to contribute to enhancing the partnership between the EU and Arab countries by sharing knowledge and expertise to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Arab countries.

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About the HiwarBrief

HiwarBrief: New Voices, New Ideas from the El Hiwar Summer School is a publication featuring policy briefs produced by participants of the Summer School on Euro-Arab Relations.

This initiative translates the knowledge gained during the Summer School into practical recommendations, contributing to ongoing Euro-Arab cooperation efforts.

Guided by Eduard Soler i Lecha, an El Hiwar expert, participants draft policy briefs on key issues explored during each edition of the programme. In 2024, these focused on women's empowerment in peace and security, conflict resolution, post-conflict governance, and economic empowerment, reflecting the urgent priority of increasing women's participation in peace-making efforts.

HiwarBrief fosters the exchange of ideas among emerging experts while strengthening the El Hiwar network, offering participants a channel to reach policymakers and advocate for impactful change



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