

# Towards a common deconstruction of gender stereotypes

Inès SAFI

In the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey, three questions were asked about the role of women in the surveyed societies, in political, economic, and social arenas, and whether these roles should increase, decrease, or stay the same. Inès Safi, analysing the responses to these questions both in Europe and in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries, draws some interesting insights on the perceived role of women in these societies and what could represent the deep and direct causes behind such perceptions.

It cannot be denied that the way the status and role of women is perceived is not a fixed ideological given; it is modelled by the context and the mechanisms involved. In turn, these perceptions contribute in reinforcing or weakening these mechanisms, and they could also, depending on their nature, constitute either a hindrance or an advantage in the empowerment of women. Hence, vicious or virtuous circles will occur – a woman appearing vulnerable or empowered will reinforce the perception we have of her, be it negative or positive, and thus she will have more or less resources.

How can these different perceptions be analysed or interpreted? How can they be improved and orientated in order to promote mutual confidence and the empowerment of women and the rest of humanity?

## Different perceptions in the countries in the region

Through the Anna Lindh/ Ipsos Survey we have detailed results available depending on gender, age groups, and countries, as well as their distribution into two geographical groups: Europe and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM). Three questions have

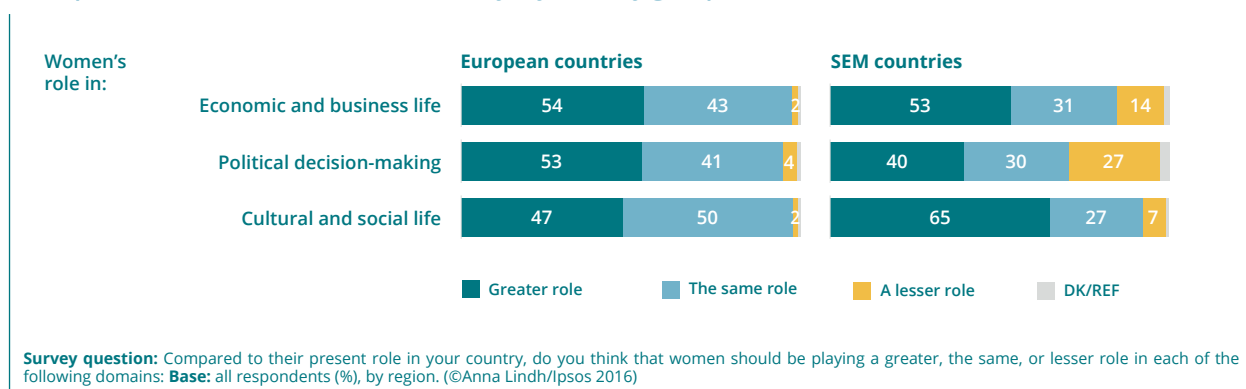
been asked, with the choice of three possible replies to each question. Should the role of women be greater, stay the same, or be reduced in three areas, whose content and scope have not been specified: making political decisions; the field of economy and business; and social and cultural life.

When comparing European findings with those of SEM countries, two prominent and contradictory facts appear when concentrating on two results: those in favour of a greater role for women, and those choosing that their role be reduced.

In favour of a greater role, the percentages of Euro/SEM countries are the following: in the political field 53/40, in the economic one 54/53, and in the social and cultural ones 47/65. It is surprising that these results are nearly identical in the field of economy, and even more so, that those of the SEM countries are distinctly higher than the European results in the social and cultural fields (Chart 11.1).

When studying more closely, country by country, and concentrating on the rates amongst men in favour of a greater role for women, it can be seen that it is almost impossible to group together, at the top of the list, the

**Chart 11.1** Perceptions about women's roles in society, by country group



European countries before those of the SEM region in any of the fields.

Let us move on to the results in favour of reducing the role of women. Here, the gaps between Europe and the SEM region increase as follows: in the field of politics 4/27, in the field of economy 2/14 and in the social and cultural fields 2/7. However, we still notice a clear preference for the role of women in socio-cultural fields in the SEM region (Chart 11.2).

The rate of women in favour of greater roles is generally higher than that of men, but in a very variable way. Surprisingly, in the field of politics, it is double the rate of men in Finland and Europe on average, while it remains very similar to the rate of men in France, Jordan and Palestine. The rate of women in favour of reducing participation is small compared to that of men, but sometimes it is unexpectedly close. In Palestine and Israel, in the economic and socio-cultural fields these rates become almost the same as those of men.

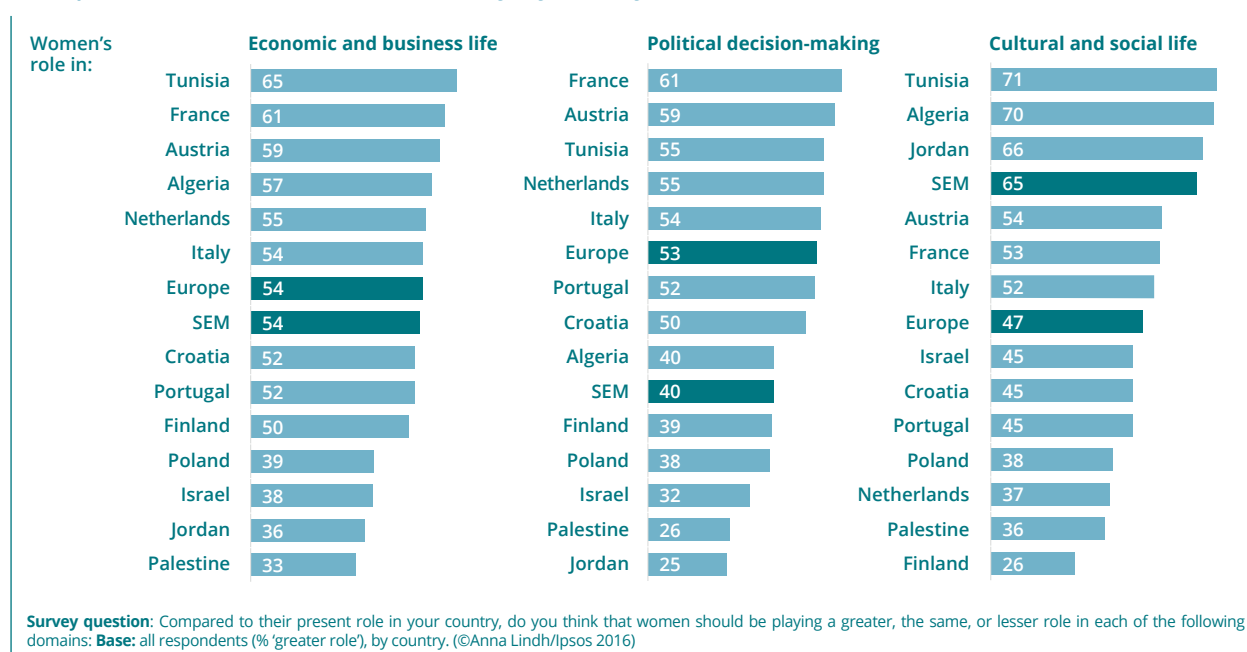
So for this data it is difficult to highlight a common trend for Europe on the one hand and for the SEM countries on the other. The variations in their averages, depending on the countries and the fields, is so great that in the end it is important to point out the specificity of each country and each field.

The most striking example is Tunisia, which in the three fields stands out through the level of men in favour of a greater role for women and is relatively high compared to the SEM countries, as well as the majority of the European countries. This is surprising when taking

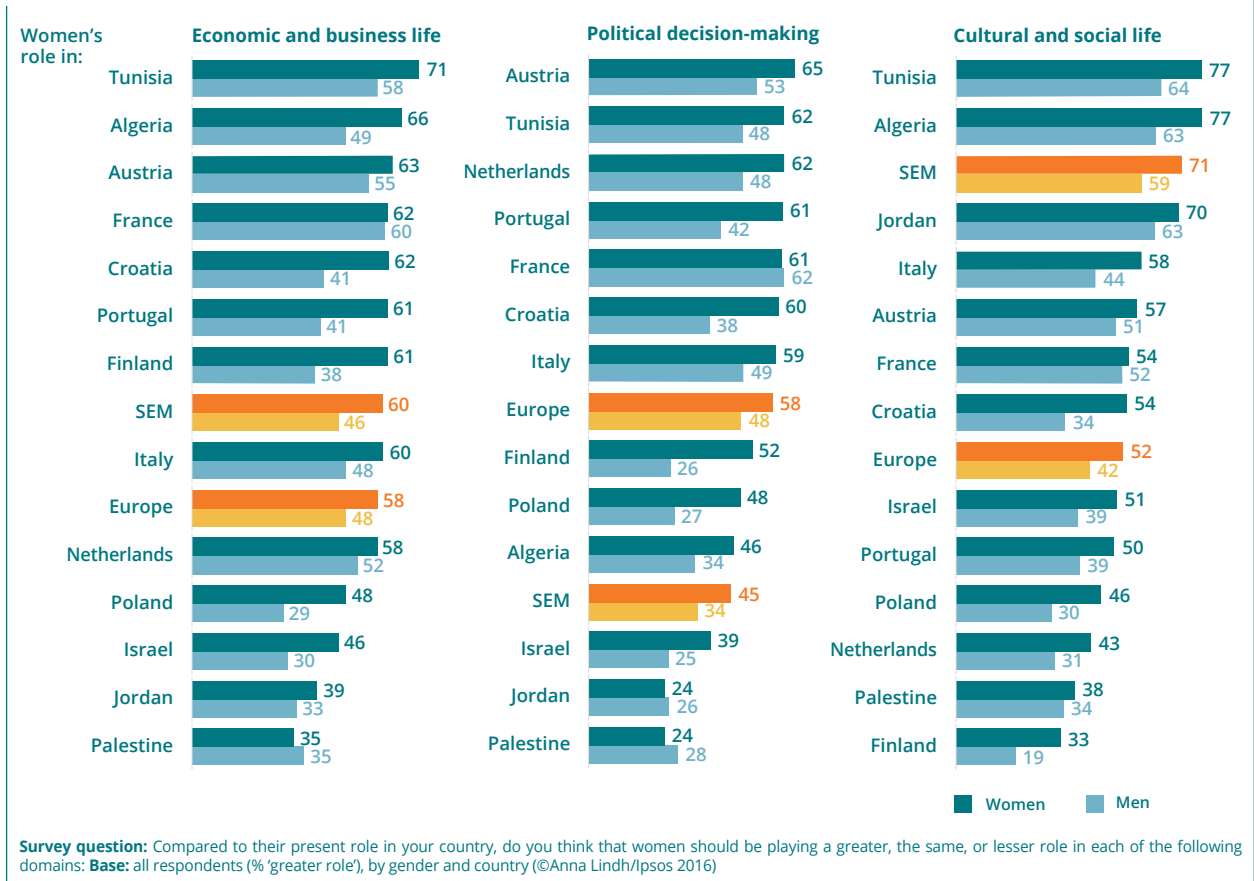
into account that the economic situation there is still fragile and that there has been a marked development in extremist movement since the revolution. Women represent 31% of the members of parliament in 2016. Yet, in opposition to the high level of men in favour of a greater role of women in politics, 22% of men prefer women to have a reduced role in that field. It is difficult to detect a sole reason for this. Do they consider that women are already too present, or is it the messages conveyed by extremists that have shaped this opinion? Did women in politics really 'succeed', or is it the level of their 'success' that has been conveyed to the public that is misleading? The fact that 12% of women prefer a lower participation in politics is surprising. It could reveal either religious convictions or a negative perception of the political arena and its conflicts (Chart 11.3).

It should be remembered that according to the 2015 World Bank indicators, the rate of unemployed female/male citizens in Tunisia is 38/35% within the majority age group 15-25 year-olds, and 21.1/12.5% of the total age groups; this shows a very precarious situation, even amongst the highly qualified. Such a large proportion of unemployed young people is a fact that extends beyond Tunisia and could explain the somewhat surprising trend that the youth are generally less favourable towards women's participation. It could be expected that men perceive women as competitors in the labour market, persuaded that men should have priority because, more than women, they need to support their families. However, the rate of Tunisian men reluctant for women's participation in the economy is 12%, comparable to that in Israel (11%), where the women/men unemployment

**Chart 11.2**  
Perceptions about women's roles in society, by country



**Chart 11.3** Perceptions about women's roles in society, by gender and country



rate in 2015 was 5.5/5.8% in total, and was 10.5/8.9% among youth. Reasons other than the economic situation could be sought to explain this, including the influence of religious orthodoxy in these countries.

**Rethinking individual people's personal ambitions for true empowerment**

The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey has the merit of illustrating complex variations, in contrast to a simplistic interpretation, which attributes the perception of the role of women to purely ethnic or religious origins. Such an interpretation is in itself a biased perception, which reduces the complexity of the way these perceptions appear and are sustained. It hides the profane or material causes that strongly interact with dominant ideologies and influence their development.

As an example, it must be taken into account that domestic violence is still trivialised, and women are often expected to put up with it, even in the SEM countries where men are in favour of the participation and education of women, and where the number of female university students is often greater than that of males.

Moreover, women's social power should not necessarily be characterised by the terms proposed in the survey.

Under the banner of universalism, the tendency is to make simplistic extrapolations stemming from Western references, adopted beyond its borders, or more precisely, a form of universalist feminism. Any 'local' views opposing, moderating, or putting into context these 'global' views, is accused of being regressive – egalitarianism becomes dogmatism, and even becomes an ally of racial prejudice.

So, this focus on the way women's roles are perceived, which should be equal to those of men, becomes the only indicator of the way their importance in society is perceived. Now, the world has been invaded by the model of capitalism based on a supra-rational economy, which has eliminated a way of life where nature, handicraft (inherently linked to the arts), literature and poetry are valued, and have often an important spiritual scope, as was the case in Islam. One has to stress that unknown Muslim women have been queens; others have greatly influenced rulers or the course of history, have been important patrons or reputed spiritual leaders. At the same time, home life can also play a rich and central role, offering an environment which is favourable for primary and essential apprenticeship, where love and the feeling of security are important foundations for the transmission of knowledge (including various skills and know-

how), and where women can enjoy sizeable authority. However, this centre of gravity is shifting – as if the sign of progress is that women and children should not stay at home. Working in a factory has a more positive value than being a weaver at home, and maternity becomes a rival of feminine empowerment.

Therefore, it has to be understood what is meant by empowerment. It is better not to try and define it in an absolute way, and to leave for each woman the possibility of choosing freely the path that corresponds the best to her deepest aspirations. This necessitates an ability to break free from ideological, political or religious systems, which either dominate or manipulate her. But it also requires that at the same time a man who is not only at the heart of those systems, but also a victim of them, who reproduces their patterns of domination, and even sometimes of persecution, must also break free.

In particular two ideological systems confine the women and men from the SEM countries. On one hand, the ultraliberal rationalism and all its environmental and geopolitical impacts generate poverty not only on the material level but also when it is a question of the value and respect of the human being. In order to encourage a mother to go out, it is important that the economic system makes the external environment less dangerous and more conducive to her happiness and that it takes maternity, but also paternity, systematically into account, so that men share the same responsibility. This entails finding solutions for the laws of the jungle that govern the industrial environment, as well as the mechanisation of jobs and the standardisation of objects and mentalities.

On the other hand, the system of religious rationalism also leads to the impoverishment of spirituality, beauty and inspiration, at the expense of reductive literalism. Concerning Islam, I would encourage the promotion of female role models, both historical and current – women rulers, scientists or poets, patrons or illustrious spiritual leaders of great learned men. Having contributed to the history of mankind as a whole, they should be better known as an antidote to the stereotypes conveyed by collective imaginaries, both in SEM countries, where they are articulated around frozen definition of what should be an 'exemplary' Muslim woman, and in Europe, where the image of an alienated one prevails. These stereotypes create additional barriers to the fulfilment of women in the SEM countries, undermining their self-confidence and the trust in their own cultural and civilizational resources. We could also evoke women's own views on men, whom they may consider rivals, and the SEM countries views on Europe, which all impede any dialogue and mutual trust. Even if Europe, because of its position of strength, is lesser dependent and sensitive to them, such negative perceptions may prevent peaceful intercultural dialogue, and lead, for example, to the rejection of constructive criticism or bona fide projects put forward by Europe.

Finally, in the Anna Lindh/Ipsos survey, we could detect the effects of social injustice and extremism that come with consumerism, and that we hope to counterbalance. But we could also pay attention to the aspirations expressed in the Survey, without stopping at their value judgements. The number of those aiming at the participation of the women in the social and cultural fields is particularly high in the SEM countries. The role of culture, including sciences, arts, literature and tales, amongst others, cannot be underestimated in relation to economic and political roles. In this area, women's power could expand and act deeply, and transform in a more efficient way societies and mentalities, leading them to free themselves from oppressive ideological and economic systems.

**Inès SAFI** is Researcher in Quantic Physics at CNRS, Paris-Saclay-Orsay campus.