



SUPPORTING ARAB WOMEN AT THE TABLE (SAWT)

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN IRAQ

Authors

Dr. Ilham Makki
Reem Ghassan



**Funded by
the European Union**

صَوْت
SAWT

Supporting
Arab Women
at the Table

جمعية العمل العراقية
Iraqi Al-Amal Association

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



This paper was facilitated by the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) and produced as part of the Supporting Arab Women at the Table (SAWT) project, funded by the European Union (EU) and led by ARI.

This publication was funded/co-funded by the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the Iraqi Al-Amal Association and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

© 2023 Arab Reform Initiative. All Rights Reserved.



This license allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms.

Cover Photo: An Iraqi woman casts her ballot in the Iraqi parliamentary elections at a polling station, April 30, 2014 in Irbil, Iraq.

July 2023

Table of contents

1	Women's Political Participation in Iraq
1	Executive Summary
4	Recommendations
4	<i>For the government:</i>
4	<i>For political parties:</i>
4	<i>For civil society organizations</i>
4	<i>For international organizations</i>
5	Introduction
6	Iraqi Political Parties and Movements: Historical Evolution of Parties in Power
8	Legal Framework of Women's Participation in Politics
8	<i>Women's Quota: Constitution vs. Electoral Laws</i>
9	<i>The New 2020 Electoral Law: More Women in Parliament without a Quota</i>
11	<i>The Quota and Political Parties: The Way to Power</i>
12	<i>Women's Quota: Society vs. The Power of Parties</i>
15	<i>The Women's Quota is Necessary, According to Women</i>
16	Political Party Criteria for Nominating Women
17	<i>Sect, Kinship, and Loyalty to the Party</i>
19	<i>Popular Base and Clan Background</i>
20	<i>Hijab or Objectification: Women's Bodies as a Symbol of Political Identity</i>
22	<i>Social Notions of Competence and Good Conduct</i>
23	Women's Roles in Political Parties
25	<i>The Glass Ceiling: Women and Positions of Power</i>
26	<i>Political Party Programmes for Women's Empowerment</i>
28	Access to Economic Resources: An Obstacle and a Pathway in Women's Political Participation
28	<i>Policies Exacerbating Women's Poverty</i>
29	<i>Money As Power</i>
30	Political Violence based on discrimination against Women
32	Female Activists and Political Parties: Tense Relations
33	Equality or Justice: An Ongoing Debate
35	<i>Equality between Political and Civil Action</i>

Executive Summary

In an effort to combat the historical exclusion of women from politics, all international conventions and processes have emphasised the principle of equality and elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against women. The preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates the need to have “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women.” Several international instruments explicitly enshrine the right to equality between men and women in political and public life, such as Article 25 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 7 of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was specifically linked to women’s right to political participation and representation at all international and national levels. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women’s General recommendation No. 23 also called upon states parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life. Resolution 1325 is the first UN Security Council resolution to acknowledge the importance of women’s meaningful and equal participation in political life, stressing their involvement in negotiations and peacekeeping efforts. However, women still face structural challenges in politics. In fact, women occupied only 26% of positions in national parliaments in 2020 worldwide.¹ Iraq ranks second after the UAE in women’s participation in Parliament, taking over 28.9% of the seats in the 2021 elections.² Women’s political participation and representation are not only fundamental human rights, but also indispensable requirements for democracy and sustainable development and peace.

Political parties across the world work on political mobilization, present candidates to represent their aspirations in local and national elections, raise funds for electoral campaigns, and provide public services to pave their way to power. Moreover, ruling parties set the priorities of public policy and laws that regulate the community and the lives of individuals. They also appoint people to leadership roles within the government. In this context, political parties play a pivotal role in women’s political participation. The parties’ social considerations – in terms of public stance and internal practices – affect the political empowerment of women. They are often the lynchpin to creating political opportunities and pathways for women. Hence, political parties are key and they constitute the main structure that would enable women to access political positions.

Following the change of the political regime in Iraq in 2003, a 25% women’s parliamentary quota was introduced into the new Iraqi Constitution of 2005. Most conservative and traditional political blocs and parties were not involved in setting the quota. Indeed, it was imposed upon them due to pressures by the feminist movement at the time.³ The political parties quickly adapted to the women’s quota, drawing in female candidates and electors. Additionally, they modified the application of the women’s quota by amending two electoral laws: Law No. 16 of 2005 on closed lists, specifying 18 electoral districts where voters don’t know candidate names; and Law No. 9 of 2020 on open districts, specifying 83 electoral districts where voters know the candidates, who come from their geographical area or electoral district.

According to the “Women in Politics: 2020” index issued by UN Women, Iraq ranked 70th globally in the “women in Parliament” category and 176th for “women in ministerial positions”.⁴ This marked a decrease in women’s ministerial participation after the first round, with the persistence of the one-quarter quota for women’s participation in the legislature during the four elections post-2003. This disparity in representation raises many questions as to political agendas for involving and empowering women in politics and to the political parties’ commitments to equality. Were these commitments reflected in the parties’

1 “Proportion of Seats Held by Women in National Parliaments”, World Bank, available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS> (accessed 30 October 2022) (World Bank, “Proportion of seats”).

2 “The UAE Ranks First Regionally and Fourth Internationally in Women’s Representation in Parliament”, CNN Arabic, 21 February 2022, available at <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2022/02/21/women-in-parliaments-ipu-jan-2022-infographic> (CNN Arabic, “UAE Ranks First”).

3 Many researchers often use “feminism/feminist movement” and “women’s movement” interchangeably without a clear or explicit definition, especially when categorizing people, groups, or organizations. Researchers who differentiate between the women’s movement and the feminist movement focus on the objectives that actors and activists aim to achieve: the objectives of the women’s movement include working on women’s issues in different fields by a group of women and all those who identify as such, while the feminist movement focuses on specific patriarchy-related challenges and women’s dependency. In all cases, the feminist discourse differs from the women’s movement rhetoric in its focus on women’s status in society and politics, by using the analysis that aims to challenge women’s dependency and change the structure of the gender-based hierarchy. Dorothy E. McBride and Amy G. Mazur, “Women’s Movements, Feminism, and Feminist Movements”, in *Politics, Gender, and Concepts: Theory and Methodology*, ed. Gary Goertz and Amy G. Mazur, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

4 “Women in Politics: 2020”, UN Women, 1 January 2020, available at <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Women-in-politics-map-2020-en.pdf> (UN Women, “Women in Politics”).

2 Women's Political Participation in Iraq

internal structure, by having women in leadership positions in a party's general secretariat? What kind of programmes and procedures are political parties actioning to empower women politically? How did political parties deal with equality issues when promulgating laws and making public policies that impact women's lives? What is the relationship between women's rights activists and the ruling political parties? And what kind of challenges and forms of violence do women face in politics?

To answer these questions, and to obtain a deeper understanding of the issue, this paper relied on in-depth interviews with 22 male politicians, 24 female politicians and candidates, and 19 female women's-rights activists. Each interview was at minimum half an hour, with some lasting over an hour. The interviews began during the parliamentary elections of October 2021 and took three months to complete in five governorates (Basra, Kirkuk, Najaf, Nineveh, and the districts of Karkh and Rusafa in the Baghdad governorate). Some of these interviews were conducted before the elections, some were held after the election pre-results and others post-results. This yielded a variety of perceptions, especially from female candidates who won or lost. This process followed a review of key research and literature on related themes in order to analyse the contexts and data according to the conclusions drawn from these papers. A main challenge and difficulty faced in this paper was the respondents' preoccupation with the elections, publicity and media activities, and results. The timing posed a great challenge for the researchers in terms of conducting the interviews, as well as respondents' wariness because of their fear of political misrepresentation, especially when requesting an audio recording of the interview. Processing the large dataset to detect recurrent patterns was also difficult and required additional time and effort.

The paper draws several conclusions, primarily:

- The laws and measures aimed at implementing the quota system maintained a relatively fixed representation of women in the Iraqi Parliament at 25%, although the Constitution had set this percentage as a minimum requirement and not as a fixed representation percentage. Many women managed to win previous elections from 2005 to 2018 without the need for a set quota.
- Politicians' answers revealed an explicit and direct alignment with partisan agendas, wherein they considered the women's quota as a means to win seats in areas where it is difficult for a man to win because he cannot rally enough voters to secure the parliamentary seat.
- The women's quota imposed on parties by law was very difficult to pass and adopt within the parties. Women occupied 18.3% of leadership positions, although their leadership is often confined to managing offices concerned with women's and family affairs within the party's structure.
- Parties did not provide means of empowerment and training for new female parliamentarians or enable them to make decisions. Additionally, they courted female candidates who were not well-versed in women's rights issues and had no previous experience or expertise in political action. Such candidates submitted to the party leader's authority, thus confirming the stereotype that women are incompetent and not suited to political work and that the legal quota is only the reason for their accession to Parliament, emphasizing that politics are "a man's world."
- New parties that were formed outside the traditionally dominant parties, especially after the October Revolution of 2019, tended to have greater political representation of women within party structures. For instance, in one of these new parties, women's participation reached 50% of the number of candidates in the elections.
- Many female candidates received direct and significant support from local communities and clans. For the first time, women presented their electoral agenda at the clan's *madiaf* (hosting room), a space that had been exclusive to men, thus overturning the idea that society, with its customs and traditions, is incapable of change.
- Most of the women interviewed (politicians and activists) agreed on the important role of the quota in promoting women's participation in the political field. According to their responses, it is an effective and rapid mechanism to promote women's participation in Parliament, the political field from which they have been historically excluded. Without such a quota, women would not have been elected to Parliament.
- Political parties impose significant requirements on female candidates. In addition to the conditions of sect and religion, loyalty to the party and its ideology, and having mass public support, parties have also imposed unofficial veil and dress codes on women to reflect the party's religious identity. Some parties impose additional physical appearance criteria on female candidates (different from those imposed on men), often intended to limit traditionally feminine attire, in an attempt to promulgate a stereotypical image of women and femininity as being separate from and incompatible with political

3 Women's Political Participation in Iraq

leadership and decision-making capacities.

- A clear pattern appeared in the responses of respondents: the roles most assigned to women within parties align with their stereotyped role as caregivers. This includes communicating with women in their constituencies, distributing humanitarian aid, and conducting awareness and publicity activities for the party. As for work within the party and in governmental authorities, women take on roles related to education, the party's promotional campaigns, public relations, the media, offices related to human rights and women's affairs, and civil society organisations.
- Most female politicians and candidates lack economic resources for structural reasons related to the nature of rentier economies and the exclusion of women from positions of control over the state's financial resources, not to mention the lack of economic support for female candidates from parties.
- Female politicians and candidates face challenges related to social disparities; they are still tasked with caring for children and family alongside their responsibilities outside the home, which requires more effort and time. Moreover, the traditional link between honour and the female body reinforces rules that restrict women's movement and limits their ability to travel, go out without an escort, or attend meetings with men, which further inhibits women's opportunities for leadership training. These same social norms free men from the burdens of homelife responsibilities and encourage their presence in the public and political spheres, thus allowing them to acquire leadership skills and learn the art of political rhetoric.
- Politically active women face various forms of psychological violence against women such as mockery, contempt, trolling, threats of publishing "scandals" about their personal lives on social media, fabrication of pictures and videos, tearing up campaign images, and spreading sexual innuendos by posting photos on social media of someone kissing an image of a female candidate or politician. There is also attempted blackmail, using hacked personal accounts or threats of publishing compromising pictures, unless the targeted women withdraw from the political field or pay money.
- Many female activists and women's rights advocates agreed that there is a rift and a lack of trust with political parties because most parties refuse to work and cooperate with female advocates. In addition, joining a political party hinges on them abandoning their feminist political agendas and working under the orders and directives of the leaders of political parties, which is opposed by most advocates.

Recommendations

For the government:

- Establish a comprehensive national process to promote women's political participation, addressing all obstacles that constitute direct and indirect forms of discrimination against such participation at all levels, adopt a bottom-up approach, and allocate financial resources for this purpose.
- Issue a law on the women's quota for the executive branch, as the percentage of women in the Council of Ministers is usually much lower than their percentage in Parliament, which highlights the importance of the quota in improving women's participation in decision-making.
- Create safe and favourable environments for women's political participation in the private and public sectors by taking measures to prevent and combat all forms of violence, hate speech, and sexist discourse against women.
- Adopt a comprehensive, social equality -sensitive, official media policy to counter the stereotypes of traditional social roles for women and men.
- Encourage women's participation in politics and the labour market by ensuring affordable childcare and adopting measures in favour of a better work-life balance.

For political parties:

- Mainstream clear, equality-sensitive rules and procedures that guarantee a transparent nomination process for leadership positions within political parties.
- Ensure greater representation of women within party structures, such as the General Secretariat and central and subsidiary executive committees, and adopt a voluntary quota system within parties.
- Support and fund electoral campaigns to enable a larger and, ultimately, equal participation of women in elections.

For civil society organizations

- Encourage the establishment of women's networks or coalitions that include women's rights activists, advocates, and parliamentarians to pressure the government and Parliament into enacting laws and formulating policies that address forms of discrimination against women in various educational, social, economic, and political fields.
- Support and promote the electoral campaigns of independent women.
- Provide training and capacity-building programmes for female candidates to enhance their political skills.

For international organizations

- Provide financial support to non-governmental organizations that seek to promote equality and the inclusion and participation of women in political and public decision-making processes.
- Strengthen and ensure a sustainable and safe civic space for women and women's rights organizations to meet and hold decision-makers accountable on issues of discrimination and violence against women.
- Create public-dialogue platforms between civil society organizations and political parties to discuss the obstacles and challenges facing women and develop mechanisms for joint action to increase women's representation in the political field.

Introduction

Women's participation and presence in politics and power is a strong indicator of democracy in any society. Women's political participation and representation is not only a fundamental human right, but an absolute necessity for sustainable development, democracy, and sustainable peace. Therefore, international and local efforts have been mobilized to ensure women's representation in decision-making positions within committees and councils, as well as in Parliament, in order to achieve parity with men in terms of political influence and positions of authority. The Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates the need to have "faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women". Several international instruments explicitly enshrined the right to equality between men and women in political and public life, notably Article 25 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 7 of the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women specifically enshrined women's right to political participation and representation on all international and national levels. In addition, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's General Recommendation No. 23 called upon states parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political and public life. Resolution 1325 is the first UN Security Council resolution to acknowledge the importance of women's meaningful and equal participation in political life, stressing their involvement in all negotiations and peacekeeping efforts. However, women still face structural challenges in politics. Women's quotas in national parliaments worldwide did not surpass 26% in 2020.⁵

In Iraq, Article 20 of the 2005 Constitution guaranteed women's right to participate in public affairs and their right to vote, elect, and run for office, similar to men.⁶ Paragraph 4 of Article 49 grants women the right to political participation through no less than a quarter of the number of parliamentary seats.⁷ Iraq ranks second after the UAE in women's participation in Parliament, taking over 28.9% of the seats in the 2021 elections.⁸

However, discriminatory laws and policies still feed into social norms and social stereotypes that exclude women, restrict their capacity to control economic resources and access opportunities, and maintain the sex-based hierarchy, further hindering women's access to positions of power. This is due to the ruling authority's lack of political will to integrate the female perspective into their strategies, plans, and policies for different sectors, such as the environment, industry, agriculture, security, or petroleum. The ruling class keeps its distance from, or refuses to acknowledge, equality and human rights issues related to women. Numerous laws and policies are riddled with discriminatory articles that legalize violence and limit women to unpaid, caregiving roles, further inhibiting women's opportunities for employment and education. This situation is coupled with a weak rule of law, a fragile justice system, widespread use of firearms, and a culture of violent extremism and hate speech. All of these factors have created an unsafe environment for women, making the exercise of their rights and dignity difficult or even impossible to achieve and hindering their participation in public life.

Integrating women into politics is a complex, multi-dimensional process that requires an integrated approach. The Iraqi State must play a key role in addressing the obstacles hindering women's access to positions of power: starting with political education in society (a bottom-up approach), and then aligning laws, policies, and structures with the principle of equality (a top-down approach). In this context, political parties also play a pivotal role in including women in politics. Upon winning the elections, it would be up to the parties to appoint people to leadership positions within the government, manage state institutions, and set the priorities for public-policy planning and legislation that will govern people's lives.

Political parties post-2003 can be viewed as a by-product of the violence on the political scene that has been pervasive since the creation of the Iraqi State in 1921. The ruling parties have shown conservative, and often conflicting, tendencies towards equality issues and women's rights. Many were opposed to including the women's quota in the 2005 Constitution, but quickly adapted and recruited female candidates and voters in order to win the largest number of seats. They dealt pragmatically with the quota's application according to the changing electoral law since 2005, until the latest amendment by virtue of Law No. 9 of 2020.

⁵ World Bank, "Proportion of Seats".

⁶ Iraq Constitution Article 20 states: "Men and women have the right to participate in public affairs and have political rights, including the right to vote, elect, and run for office", (Iraqi Constitution Article 20).

⁷ Iraqi Constitution Article 49, paragraph. 4, states: "The electoral law aims to achieve a women's representation rate that is no less than the quarter of the number of parliamentary seats" (Iraqi Constitution Article 49).

⁸ CNN Arabic, "UAE Ranks First".

The ruling political parties have had a strained relationship with women's rights advocates, and their approach has lacked consensus. Conservative religious parties accused women activists of undermining social values, customs, and traditions while attempting to transplant western culture and agendas. Women's rights activists and advocates meanwhile withstood all parties' attempts to undermine the guarantees to women's rights; in addition to the pressure exerted upon them from the ruling parties to limit their civic action and activities, female activists also faced precarious security conditions.

Women maintained 25% representation in Parliament across all election rounds, despite the constitutional article specifying this number as a minimum. Iraq ranked 70th globally in the "women in parliament" category and 176th for "women in ministerial positions", with a decline in women's participation in ministries after the first round.⁹ This paper aims to examine the role of political parties in causing this representation disparity and tries to gauge the extent to which these parties involve and empower women in politics and positions of power and the extent of their commitment to equality. Was this commitment reflected in the parties' internal structure, by having women in leadership positions in a party's general secretariat? What kind of programmes and procedures are political parties actioning to empower women politically? How did the political parties deal with equality issues when promulgating laws and making public policies that impact women's lives? What is the relationship between women's rights activists and the ruling political parties? And what kind of challenges and forms of violence do women face in politics?

To answer these questions, and to obtain a deeper understanding of the issue, this paper relied on in-depth interviews with 22 male politicians, 24 female politicians and candidates, and 19 women's rights female activists. Each interview was at minimum half an hour, with some lasting and over an hour. The interviews began during the parliamentary elections of October 2021 and took three months to complete in five governorates (Basra, Kirkuk, Najaf, Ninevah, and the districts of Karkh and Rusafa in the Baghdad governorate). Some of these interviews were conducted before the elections, some were held after the election pre-results, and others post-results. This yielded a variety of perceptions, especially from female candidates who won or lost. This process followed a desk review of key research and literature on related themes in order to analyse the contexts and data according to the conclusions drawn from these papers. A main challenge and difficulty faced in this paper was the respondents' preoccupation with the elections, publicity and media activities, and results. The timing posed a great challenge for the researchers in terms of conducting the interviews, as well as respondents' wariness because of their fear of political misrepresentation, especially when requesting an audio recording of the interview. Processing the large dataset to detect recurrent patterns was also difficult and required additional time and effort.

Iraqi Political Parties and Movements: Historical Evolution of Parties in Power

The enactment of the Parties and Associations Law in 1922, one year after the creation of the Iraqi State, has contributed to the flourishing of political activity. Several political parties were founded, including the Ennahda Party, the National Iraqi Party, and the Ummah Party.¹⁰ They represented the social and political elites' aspirations for influencing the general political situation, which in turn led to civil society actors calling for freedom, equality, and rights. Calls for women's rights were raised for the first time, particularly the right to education. This allowed for the establishment of many feminist associations.¹¹ These developments were also influenced by the feminist movements in Syria and Egypt and the reciprocated visits across Arab countries. These associations promoted the advancement of political, social, and economic rights for women, especially in 1924, during the drafting of the first Iraqi Constitution. Women were not granted the right to participate in elections, but they were able to engage in politics by joining progressive parties, entering the labour market, and increasing the number of educated women.¹² These advances also coincided with the evolution of the national political movement during the 1940s and the 1950s.

9 UN Women, "Women in Politics".

10 Farouq Saleh Al-Omar et. al., "The Beginnings of the Partisan Life in Iraq: 1922-1925", The Centre for Basra & Arab Gulf Studies, University of Basra, Vol. 47 Issue 1.2, 2019, p.42.

11 The first feminist organization, Al-Nahda Women's Club, appeared in 1924.

12 Mohamad Turki Al-Obeidi, "Training Manual on Human Rights", Iraqi Al-Amal Association, 2019, p. 121.

Both Iraqi women and the developing political movement in Iraq were greatly influenced by the evolution of the global rights movement after World War II and the promulgation of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Iraqi woman participated in the 1944 Arab Women's Conference in Egypt, leading to the creation of the first Iraqi Women's Union.¹³ Ameenah Al-Rahal became the first woman to hold a leadership position in the Iraqi Communist Party, which integrated feminist action into its agenda by establishing women's committees and thereby offering a new pathway for women's political participation. Dr. Nazeeha Al-Dulaimi¹⁴ pushed for the creation of the Iraqi Women's League in 1952, through which she was able to attract numerous female figures of all ages and professions.¹⁵

After the Baath Party rose to power in Iraq in 1968, the 1970 provisional Constitution adopted the principle of social equality and stipulated the protection of minorities and the right to form peaceful associations and participate in political unions and parties. The improvement of the economic situation and political stability in Iraq during the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s advanced women's status in education and employment. However, their participation in political and public life was almost non-existent under the Baath regime.¹⁶

In 1972, the General Federation of Iraqi Women, an instrument of the Baath party, was established as a feminist framework to support women's participation in the public sphere. It created development programmes for women in the fields of education, literacy, training, and professional capacity building. In 1983, women won seats in Parliament, also known as the National Assembly, and the People's Councils, but in very limited numbers.¹⁷ They did not generally achieve decision-making positions. The Penal Code continued to entrench practices of violence, discrimination, and inequality against women by granting perpetrators impunity for honour killings. The Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council's decisions, which often have the same status as laws, imposed harsh sentences on women accused of prostitution.¹⁸ Women also faced many challenges due to their, or their families', political activities that opposed the regime and its ideology, for which they were subjected to various violations including imprisonment, torture, killing, rape, and displacement.

The many internal and external armed conflicts with neighbouring countries during the Baath era, and their economic and social repercussions, pushed the regime to appoint women in all of the state's institutions. This empowered large groups of women with managerial capacities, expertise, and knowledge. However, this coincided with a general restriction of women's rights due to the increased occurrence and imposition of military and tribal patterns and practices and Islamic rules. These restrictions also followed the launch of the "faith campaign" after the comprehensive economic sanctions against Iraq took effect in 1990, which aimed to reinforce strict patriarchal ideas, ignoring civil laws designed to protect women's rights. Child marriages, polygyny, and prohibition of education increased, and more restrictions were imposed on women's work, transportation, and attire.

The first form of democracy in Iraq after 2003 was pluralism; parties that had been operating from outside the country as opposition returned and formed a consociational democracy and adopted the sectarian quota system. The most prominent of these parties were the Da'wa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq, the Virtue Party (Fadilah), and the Sadrist Movement. These political parties held the religious, Shiite ideology that dominates the southern regions of Iraq. The Iraqi Islamic Party controls the middle and western regions of Iraq with its religious, Sunni ideology. There are also national Kurdish parties, such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, that control the Kurdistan region and the neighbouring regions of Kirkuk, Mosul, and Diyala. Secular parties and movements include the Communist Party and other newly formed Arab movements with an Arab nationalist, left-wing, socialist ideology, such as the Iraqi National Accord.¹⁹ Some of these parties have armed groups in their ranks and alliances with businessmen and religious leaders, granting them expansive power and enabling them to control state institutions and resources.

In this era, and amid the significant changes and the redrafting of the Constitution, feminist activists were able to intensify their efforts and demands. They succeeded in obtaining the women's quota and introducing it into the Constitution, with no less than a quarter of the parliamentary seats, as part of the mechanisms that would reinforce the democratic system guaran-

13 A master's thesis on the Iraqi feminist movement (Women's League).

14 Dr. Nazeeha Al-Dulaimi was appointed as the first female minister in Abdel Kareem Qassem's government after the revolution of 14 July 1958.

15 The Status of Women in Iraq: An Assessment of Women's De Facto and De Jure Rights, July 2004 (The Status of Women in Iraq).

16 The Status of Women in Iraq.

17 Rahiba Al-Khumaisi, "A Glimpse into the History of Iraqi Women," Iraqi Communist Party, 1 December 2020, available at <https://www.iraqicp.com/index.php/sections/society/46663-2020-12-10-12-28-18>

18 The Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council's Decision No. 234 of 2001

19 Omar Al-Jaffal, "Non-Democratic Parties in a Democratic Regime", The Middle East Centre, 2021, p.10.

teed by the Constitution and the right to equality and other protections for women's rights.

The structure, leadership, names, and stances of parties changed according to developments on the political scene, armed conflicts, and the shifting map of dominant parties and military power. The control of Sunni parties and leaders, as well as that of Arab parties with tribal or clan leaderships, diminished in Sunni regions. A number of Shiite parties changed their names while keeping their religious visions and stances, especially with the increasing demands by society and the religious Shiite *marja'a* ("source to follow" or "religious reference") in the 2018 elections, asking voters to not re-elect those who had previously held political positions yet failed in managing state affairs. Popular outbursts against the ruling parties' policies increased following the increase in administrative corruption, the decline in services, and the weakness of the rule of law and justice system. These issues culminated in the October Revolution in 2019 led by the youth and civil society, which soon birthed new parties in southern Iraq and Baghdad, most of which are nationalist, including: the *Imtidad* (extension) Movement, *Nazel Akhod Haqi* (mobilizing to reclaim my rights), *Al-Bayt Al-Watani* (national house), and *Al-Khayma Al-Iraqia* (Iraqi tent). These parties adopted various pathways: some represented the revolution independently, some represented the cooperation between certain political powers and rebels, and others claimed to belong to the rebels, such as the *Al-Furaten* Movement formed by a politician who separated from the *Da'wa* Party.²⁰ However, the influence of these new parties representing the revolution does not hold a candle to the power of the dominant religious parties and movements. Also, regardless of their position, parties in general do not include women in the political negotiations conducted among party leaders to form the government and nominate the three presidents, among other crucial matters. Women are consistently excluded from political decision-making.

Legal Framework of Women's Participation in Politics

Women's Quota: Constitution vs. Electoral Laws

*"The quota is the parties' best option to include women in the political process. The rest are merely slogans that are removed from reality."*²¹

Over the past twenty years, more than half of the world's countries have adopted a quota system to ensure women's representation in politics; civil society advocacy on an international level led the UN Economic and Social Council to call upon all states in 1990 to adopt a 30% quota for women's representation in decision-making institutions and committees. The 1995 Beijing Conference also encouraged states to go further in pursuit of an equal balance within political and administrative entities and judicial institutions, in that it called for implementing measures that would add weight and support to the quotas. Generally, setting a quota is insufficient by itself for ensuring women's political representation, even though it represents one step closer toward true equality.²²

Following the 2003 political regime change in Iraq by the global coalition forces led by the United States, the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period included an article on women's quota. Article 30(c) guarantees no less than 25% women's representation in the legislature.²³ This came as a result of the relentless efforts of feminist activists, who succeeded in making their voices heard in decision-making spheres and in passing the quota system.

20 Al Hurra Exclusive, "The Revolution's Party is Missing" in Iraq: Young Movements and Faces Aiming for Change through Elections, Al Hurra Iraq and "Raise Your Voice" (Erf'a Sawtak), 14 January 2021, available at <https://www.alhurra.com/iraq/2021/01/14>

21 Interview 11N1, politician, Mosul, 43 years old, bachelor's degree in civil engineering, 9 November 2021.

22 Rohini Pande and Deanna Ford, *Gender Quotas and Female Leadership: A Review*, background paper for the World Development Report on Gender 2012, 7 April 2011, available at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/9120/WDR2012-0008.pdf?sequence=1>

23 Article 30(c) of the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period, 2003, states: "The National Assembly is elected in accordance with the Elections Law and the Political Parties Law. The Elections Law aims to achieve a representation of women that is not less than a quarter of the members of the National Assembly, and the fair representation for all factions of Iraqi society, including Turkmen, Chaldeans, and others."

Article 20 of the Iraqi Constitution guarantees women's right to participate in public affairs and their right to vote, elect, and run for office, similar to men.²⁴ Paragraph 4 of Article 49 enshrines women's right to political participation through no less than a quarter of the number of parliamentary seats. This right is governed by the Electoral Law.²⁵ As evidenced, Iraqi electoral laws, and other laws related to political rights, include mechanisms that ensure women's representation. The 2021 parliamentary elections were governed by legal frameworks such as Law No. 9 of 2020 on parliamentary elections, the 2015 Political Parties Law, and the Independent High Electoral Commission's regulations. The 2018 Provincial Councils Law also guarantees women's political rights.

In the "2020 Women in Politics" index issued by UN Women, Iraq ranked 70th globally in the "women in parliament" category and 176th for "women in ministerial positions."²⁶ This discrepancy in representation may be attributed to the implementation of the quota system in Parliament but not in the executive branch. It reflects a clear gap between the applicable electoral law and the extent of the political community's belief in it. It gives an idea (or raises questions) about the type of roles women assume in Iraqi authorities, which this paper will tackle in later sections.

The laws and procedures that were enacted to implement the quota system kept women's representation relatively fixed at the one-quarter level within the Iraqi Parliament, despite the fact that the Constitution set this rate only as a minimum. Many women were able to win seats without the need for the quota system in the 2005 and 2018 elections. This fixed rate is attributed to the mechanisms regulating the quota. Law No. 16 of 2005 on closed lists – where voters choose a party, not a candidate, and the winning party chooses their parliamentary candidates – specified 18 electoral districts (one district per governorate). In such closed list elections, the party nominates one woman for every three men on the winners' list. Following the amendment of the electoral law in 2010, the lists became half closed, half open: the voter can either choose a specific candidate or only vote for the party, but they remain limited to a certain number of candidates and one political party. The quota application mechanism maintained the same condition. The Sainte-Laguë seat-apportionment method was then adopted in Electoral Law No. 45 of 2013 and applied in the 2014 and 2018 elections. This method distributes seats to the winners regardless of sex; to make sure the 25% quota of women would be met, each political entity was required to provide a list of its winning candidates and apply the condition of one woman for every three men. The Sainte-Laguë method was met with significant criticism later, as it maintained the ruling parties' dominance and did not allow new parties to access the political scene. Moreover, of the 99 electoral coalitions that won in all of the five previous elections, not one major winning coalition was headed by a woman.²⁷

The New 2020 Electoral Law: More Women in Parliament without a Quota

After the October Revolution and the demands for change, the new Electoral Law No. 9 was enacted in 2020. It adopted the open district system and divided every governorate into smaller regions. Voters could now vote for a candidate from their region, without having to vote for a particular political party. This law was one of the factors that led to the increase in women's representation in Parliament, with nearly half of the winners gaining their seats based on votes instead of from the quota. This increased the ratio of women in Parliament to 28%, a figure that is still very close to 25% for many reasons and factors that we will discuss further in this paper.

Article 16 of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections Law regulated women's representation. Paragraphs 1 and 2 of Article 16 set the quota at no less than 25% of parliamentary seats, and makes meeting this ratio a condition for representation in each governorate. These two paragraphs are aligned with the constitutional text, meaning the actual ratio can exceed 25%. However, paragraph 3 of the same article stipulates that once the quota has been met, if a female candidate wins due to the votes she received, the quota-dictated seat switch is not carried out, and the quota is not applied in the electoral district or the governorate.²⁸ This paragraph often limits the ratio of women to 25%, or only slightly above 25%; while it follows the literal meaning

²⁴ Iraqi Constitution Article 20.

²⁵ Iraqi Constitution Article 49.

²⁶ UN Women, "Women in Politics".

²⁷ Naufal Hassan, "Changing the Rules of the Game: Reforming the Party System Iraq", Middle East Institute, 16 June 2021, available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/tghywr-qwad-allbt-aslah-alnzam-alhzby-fy-alraq> (Hassan, "Changing the Rules of the Game")

²⁸ Al-Waka'eh Iraqi Newspaper, "Iraqi Elections Law No. (9) of 2020," 9 November 2020, p. 6-7, available at <https://moj.gov.iq/upload/pdf/4603.pdf>

of the constitutional text, it fails to carry out the intended goal of increasing women's participation beyond the minimum. Paragraph 3 is in fact a measure to limit the ratio of women to around 25%, as was seen in the 2021 elections when over half of the female candidates won by votes received, and were not seated as a result of the quota system. This point will be discussed in further depth later in the paper. In addition, paragraph 19 of Article 16 stipulates a seat that was previously held by a woman and became vacant due to withdrawal, death, or any other reason does not necessarily have to be occupied by a woman.

Article 14 of Law No. 9 of 2020 introduced the women's quota system in electoral lists, enshrining the requirement of one female candidate for every three male candidates. As a result, this law is deemed better than the previous laws of 2013 and 2005 with regards to women's political participation. Law No. 9 divided governorates into smaller districts, requiring the voter to vote for candidates in their own district, regardless of their political entities, which used to receive direct votes in the previous elections.

The final number of female candidates was 950 out of a total of 3,225 according to the Independent High Electoral Commission. This is close to 29% of the total number of candidates, which is close to the required percentage to fulfil the quota. Political parties have a clear impact on the numbers of male and female candidates and the distribution of votes among them. This is one of the reasons why the actual percentage is close to the one-quarter quota reserved for women's representation. Nevertheless, women made a difference compared to previous years.

The 2021 elections saw the rise of 43 female political candidates at national level by votes and not by quota, out of a total of 95 female winners.²⁹ Twelve candidates received the highest number of votes in their electoral district. Two candidates were in the top 15 list of male and female winners at the national level. They are affiliated with new parties in Sulaymaniyah and Dhi Qar. In Sulaymaniyah, the quota system was not applied, as female candidates won through votes and hence achieved a representation rate amounting to 40% of the Sulaymaniyah seats. Moreover, 13 women in Iraq obtained the highest number of votes in their electoral districts, and the winners received almost 10% of the total of eligible votes in Iraq. The quota system was applied in all districts of Saladin and Maysan governorates, where women did not win by votes. The dominant parties in these governorates may have influenced these results.

It is worth noting that the preliminary results of the elections indicated the win of 97 women. Two women withdrew (or were excluded), and their seats were allocated to two men, leaving the final number at 95 women. [Observers indicated](#) that the audit of these preliminary results according to the 2020 Electoral Law showed the win of 115 women. However, the final results changed later on, as the seat allocation system plays a role in determining winners. The application or non-application of the quota system in many regions also affects the results. One of the female politicians from a conservative Islamic party confirmed that the quota is the reason women reached Parliament with the votes they received without the need for a quota. Unfortunately, being a member of Parliament does not mean that a woman will play an influential role after their election or that their opinions will be equal to those of a man:

I believe that the increase in women's numbers is due to the quota, because, as you know, the majority of those the women who entered Parliament did so similarly to men. In Al Diwaniyah governorate, one of the female candidates in the Sadrist Movement won by votes and not by quota. The quota should have been given to another woman. Unfortunately, that did not happen. Another 22 women were supposed to reach Parliament, bringing the total number to 97, which is exactly one-third of Parliament seats. This is what happened with the Sadrist Movement. 30 women out of the 75 members of the Sadrist bloc won, which is almost half, or more than one-third of members. That is excellent. However, it all depends on women's role in the committee, whether they are the chair, deputy chair, or rapporteur, etc., but also on the types of laws we want to enact. People's opinion of women differs from their opinion of men. The Iraqi reality remains a patriarchal one.³⁰

²⁹ Dr. Mahmoud Azzo Hamdow and Dr. Emad Jamil Mohsen, "Gender Analysis of the October 2021 Elections in Iraq: A Preliminary Outcome and Lessons Learned," Baghdad Women Association, p. 43, available at https://bwa-iraq.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Gender-2022analysis_merged-compressed.pdf

³⁰ Interview 23B7, female political candidate, Al-Qādisiyyah, 50 years old, bachelor's degree, member of political committee and representative of women's empowerment, 30 December 2021 (Interview 23B7, female candidate).

The Quota and Political Parties: The Way to Power

The Political Parties Law No. 36 of 2015 mentioned the representation of women in party committees in Article 11, clause 1, but without specifying the quota or making it mandatory.³¹ The political authorities refused to set a quota within party governing bodies when drafting the law, limiting the notion to “women’s representation.” However, political parties used the quota system as a way to get Parliamentary seats in the elections. It became the new method of attaining power under the then-new 2003 political system, as political authorities distributed positions post-elections based on the number of seats the party had acquired.

The respondents unanimously agreed that all political parties dealt with the quota system in the same way, regardless of their ideology, be it secular or religious, traditional or progressive. Women can access Parliament with a small number of votes. The powerful parties – such as the Sadrist Movement (14 interviews), the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan – dealt in an organized and professional manner with the quota system, supporting certain women in electoral districts.³² Regardless of men’s popularity base, they cannot compete with women on a quota seat. There were many instances where a man with thousands of votes would lose to a woman with only hundreds in the same electoral district. The parties became aware of this and thus worked on nominating women. Certain political parties, most notably those in power, conducted a thorough study to determine the number of votes that could be won in every district. In case the numbers turned out low, they’d nominate a woman, because even a few votes would guarantee the seat for the party.

The politicians explicitly agreed that parties used the women’s quota as a means to get seats in regions where it is difficult for a man with no popularity base to win according to the required number of voters. A politician from Najaf confirmed that party leaders bet on women to get the highest number of seats during the elections:

Parties deal with women in elections now on a win or lose basis. They are using women as a tool in regions where they lack popularity, so they bet on the quota, not out of belief in women, but because they know they are more likely to secure seats this way. They do not see the seat from a sex representation perspective, but as a number. One that ensures that their leader gets the highest number possible of seats.³³

On the political scene, women are described with certain common terms such as “added numbers”* when the party needs to increase the number of women on the lists (as mentioned in four interviews). This was confirmed by a female politician in Basra:

In the elections, when they are nominating their candidates, parties use a term that most Iraqis do not know of: they say, “bring some added numbers”. They use this term to describe women because they see them as such. So, yes, the quota helped parties rise, but what did it also do? It helped undermine Iraqi women’s rights and fair political participation.³⁴

According to data, women’s participation in the leadership of Iraqi political parties is very limited. One study showed that the percentage of women in certain parties increased from 10% to almost 50% of members, but their presence in leadership positions remains low or non-existent in the majority of parties. Most parties do not intend to apply the parliamentary women’s quota within the party structure. According to a study by the National Democratic Institute, the percentage of women party members has reached 27.7%, but that of women in leadership positions, which are often restricted to the women and family office, was 18.3%.³⁵ For instance, out of the 31 members of the Iraqi Communist Party’s central committee (a leadership body),

31 Political Parties Law No. 36, Article 11, clause 1(a) stipulates: “The formation of any political party or organisation is contingent on the following: the party formation application shall be presented in writing with the signature of the representative of the political party or organisation (for registration) to the Department of Political Parties and Organisations with a list of names of the founding body which shall comprise no less than 7 founding members, as well as a list of names of no less than 2,000 members across governorates, while respecting the women quota.” The text of the law is available at <https://www.moj.gov.iq/uploaded/4383.pdf>

32 As stated in multiple author-conducted interviews with politicians, female candidates, politicians, and activists.

33 Interview 51NJ5, politician, Najaf, 43 years old, bachelor’s degree, party secretary-general, 1 November 2021 (Interview 51NJ5, Najaf politician).

34 Interview 31BS4, political candidate, Basra, 61 years old, bachelor’s degree, PhD, writer and journalist, independent, 20 October 2021 (Interview 31BS4, Basra candidate).

35 The National Democratic Institute, “Political Exclusion in Iraqi Political Parties: How Women, Youth, and Components Strive to Change Politics”, 2020, available at https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Political%20Exclusion%20in%20Iraqi%20Political%20Parties_AR.pdf

only five are women.³⁶ A similar percentage could be found in any other party that does not claim to be progressive in terms of women's issues.

A politician from the Communist Party spoke lengthily about the party's historical, progressive stance on women's issues, their engagement in its activities, and the communist woman's role and effectiveness in the party's different milestones. According to him, the quota is not a positive mechanism and does not give women justice. However, women need it because of the patriarchal nature of society. He also described the limited participation of women in the party compared to men as the result of "normal" circumstances, found in all parties. He did not clarify the party's role in addressing these "normal" circumstances that inhibit women's political participation:

*The quota system was imposed out of necessity. It is not something positive, but a necessity that was imposed due to the current political situation and the hardships that the country has witnessed for the past 35 years. As you know, the Iraqi Communist Party believes in the cause of women and is a long-term advocate for it. There is equality to a large extent in women's participation in the Iraqi Communist Party. We do not discriminate between men and women, at least at the level of the party's political system, programmes, and internal regulations. Rights and obligations are equal and the result of normal circumstances. We find that the number of male party members is larger than that of women, which is the case in all organisations and parties.*³⁷

Emerging parties that have been established as an alternative for the dominant and traditional parties, particularly after the October Revolution, leaned towards more political representation of women within the party structure. They did not limit the number of women to the constitutional quota. Female candidates formed 50% of one new party's candidate list. It became clear that emerging political parties attracted women with previous political experience, wide networks of relationships, and a strong independent mobilization power in their local communities. This was evidenced by the large number of independent candidates who won parliamentary seats without the need for a quota. It was also confirmed by one of the politicians in an emerging party:

*We are the only bloc with 50% of our candidates being women. No other bloc participated in the elections with a similar percentage... Women won by a considerable number of votes and reached first place in their regions. We are proud of them. In my opinion, the quota should be cancelled because it restricts women's role. 25% is unfair to women. The law should be amended, and half of the parties' candidate list should consist of women.*³⁸

Women's Quota: Society vs. The Power of Parties

Despite the widespread adoption of the quota system in numerous countries, its usefulness in eliminating discrimination against women and achieving equality is the subject of controversy. Is it enough to change social standards and traditions that are discriminatory against women? Is it possible that a quota would indirectly promote a stereotypical image of women as ineffective in politics, such as due to the nomination of women without any political experience? Since the first round of parliamentary elections, most parties accepted the women's quota as a necessity imposed by the Constitution and by law. Consequently, parties' nominations of women were based on a criterion that was very different from the intended principle and purpose behind the quota. Leaving aside the question of whether there were enough qualified women to occupy quota of parliamentary seats, the deterioration of the security situation (particularly during the 2005 and 2010 elections) and the reluctance of the traditional parties to bring in new blood prevented many women from participating in the elections. In fact, traditional parties nominated female candidates that not only were far removed from the women's rights cause, but who also lacked the level of experience that had been expected of male candidates for political work on a partisan and societal level. These female candidates were also under the authority of the party's leader. Housewives, who had never before participated in a public meeting or discussion, were nominated. They were mostly the wives, sisters, or cousins of politicians.³⁹ This practice was... facilitated by the closed list system.

³⁶ Interview 23B15, member of the Communist Party, August 2022.

³⁷ Interview 23B4, politician, Baghdad, bachelor's degree, 18 November 2021.

³⁸ Interview 51NJ9, politician, Najaf – Mishkhab, 36 years old, bachelor's degree, freelancer, 28 November 2021.

³⁹ Interview 12K7, political candidate and elected politician, 59 years old, Kirkuk, PhD, former member of the governorate's council, political party, 18 December 2021 (Interview 12K7, Kirkuk politician).

Additionally, the parties did not empower or train their first-time parliamentarians or grant them any decision-making power, further solidifying the societal stereotype of women's incompetence and inability to practice politics, and promulgating the ideas women were only in Parliament due to the quota and that politics are a "man's world." Unfortunately, such talk was in part the result of having politically unqualified women in Parliament; meanwhile, the poor performance of dozens of male parliamentarians was disregarded. According to interviews with female activists, the parties did not address the social and cultural barriers to women's participation in the public and political spheres. On the contrary, they preserved and maintained them. That is why the parties opposed and prevented the enactment of many of the laws aiming to achieve equality and reduce violence against women:

The parties are against such laws because they do not serve them, such as the Domestic Violence Law which we worked on passing. Party X would refuse to vote on it under some pretext, but there are other underlying reasons for their refusal. Ostensible arguments would claim that it is against norms and traditions, but the real underlying reason is that if a woman files a complaint against her husband or brother now, what will she do in the future? Who are the supporters of these political parties? Clans, people... and young men who lack awareness and understanding. Therefore, when a party agrees to a similar law, it will face rejection and lack of support from its followers. Subsequently, the party chooses to reject the law in order to gain the trust of the largest possible number of people and clans.⁴⁰

For politicians, the main reasons for excluding and alienating women from politics fluctuate between society's perceptions of women's social roles and the lack of women's qualifications and capacities. Their responses, as recorded in five interviews, included confusing contradictions, such as the idea that society, via its official and nonofficial institutions, is responsible for excluding women from political empowerment, but at the same time women are capable of surpassing these obstacles: "As we all know, our society does not allow women to achieve their full potential, but nothing prevents them from playing their role to the fullest extent... it all depends on their cleverness and political experience."⁴¹

However, these politicians completely disregard the influence of the political system, its control over all institutions of social, educational, and religious upbringing, and its role in reproducing practices of discrimination and alienation against women through laws and policies. One politician from Najaf said that the quota is an urgent need, without which society's male dominance will eventually obliterate women's presence in politics. He described society's impact and control over individuals as absolute, to the extent where he himself succumbs to this influence and has no power to effect change:

There would be no representation of women without the quota system, because Iraqi society is unfortunately a patriarchal one that seeks to eliminate any role or action for women outside the household... People put forward arguments such as, "Why has God not sent a female prophet?" They also rely on certain incomplete sayings such as, "lacking in mind and religion", which was misinterpreted unfortunately and has pushed society to adopt a patriarchal attitude. We continue to suffer from this reality to this day. I am one of those who, no matter how much progress, evolution, and knowledge I achieve and acquire, society will still impose a hijab on my wife on certain occasions. She will still have to follow certain rules for greeting people and using social media, no matter how much I trust her. There are certain patriarchal determinants that persist. It does not matter whether they are halal or haram, allowed or prohibited, they are promoted as such. The main cause of this issue is the patriarchal nature of the Iraqi person. The quota was set to combat this reality, and without it we would have a parliament with no women.⁴²

The interviews with politicians resulted in a semi-consensus in blaming the "patriarchal, masculinist" society for the alienation and exclusion of women from politics. "The quota was set to guarantee women's representation in the political process... Considering that the Iraqi society is patriarchal, it does not believe in women's participation in politics. Therefore, this quota could be their guarantee for a place in politics. Patriarchal beliefs dominate the Iraqi social reality."⁴³ According to politicians, society does not believe in women's leadership capacities, especially in rural areas where clan culture is predominant. One of the politicians replaced the term "society" with "men" when describing the social determinants against women holding leadership positions, because that would undermine men's status. He sees equality measures as part of the state's responsibilities but fails to mention the responsibilities of parties or the political elite in reinforcing factors that would empower the women's status within party structures and granting leadership positions to women. Parties decide who will hold decision-making po-

40 Interview 31BS1, feminist activist, 25 years old, Basra, bachelor's degree, humanitarian programmes coordinator, 18 October 2021.

41 Interview 31BS10, politician, Basra, 59 years old, PhD, university professor, 5 November 2021.

42 Interview 51NJ5, Najaf politician.

43 Interview 22B6, politician, Baghdad, 51 years old, master's degree, 7 December 2021 (Interview 22B6, Baghdad politician).

14 Women's Political Participation in Iraq

sitions in state institutions,⁴⁴ as described by one politician:

*The reason is the nature of eastern societies in general, and Iraqi society in particular. It is a patriarchal society that does not believe in women's leadership, as it is considered disrespectful towards men and an attack on their social status... No one supports women in elections. For instance, clans in rural areas control every aspect of women's lives, despite the larger number of women there, compared to urban regions... I believe that the government should pave the way for promoting social justice culture and equality by mainstreaming women's empowerment in public administrations, in governmental and non-governmental departments, and by raising the awareness of the public in general.*⁴⁵

The politicians' arguments that social norms and customs are the obstacle to women's participation in politics are unreasonable according to female activists, because parties run the entire government, and they have the decision-making power to effect change. One activist confirms that: "Parties do not seek equality, because if they did, we would have seen equality being applied on the streets and in all aspects of our social lives. Parties are the state. Our state is comprised of parties."⁴⁶

Electoral Law No. 20 of 2020 divided governorates into 83 electoral districts, equal to the number of women's seats, in which candidates compete within the geographical area of their constituencies; this law strengthened the role of local clans and communities in determining male and female winners in elections. Women had to engage with their local clans and communities directly; surprisingly, the support that some of the clans provided to female candidates was equal to that provided to men. This was evidenced by the victory of many female candidates by the majority of votes and not by quota in rural and clan areas. As is the case in every election, the parties worked in concert with clan elders to try to control the seat distribution, female and male candidate nominations, and the distribution of votes. The interviews confirmed the political parties' attempts to control the nomination process in every district, determining who gets nominated and who must drop out of the race in each electoral district. The clans played a role in this process by supporting women in their regions, especially in freed governorates such as Nineveh, Saladin, and Kirkuk. Many female candidates presented their electoral agendas for the first time inside a clan's *madiaf*, a space traditionally limited to men. This acceptance refuted the idea that a society, with its customs and traditions, cannot change. The process of social transformation on a relational level happens slowly and is not easy to detect because it is invisible and is not reflected on the organizational or institutional level:

*Women were able to enter men's diwans (quarters) and sit next to the sheikhs, who opened their spaces for them and welcomed them... Women have proven their worth – they have been able to access spaces they had been prohibited from entering in the past. I am one of those people who were encouraged by sheikhs and clans and welcomed into their spaces. Speaking from personal experience, I do not see any difference between me and a man. Whatever I want to do, I can do it; no one can stop me.*⁴⁷

One of the female activists stated that there is a significant difference between the most recent elections and the ones held further back. There is more acceptance in society and among the youth of women's nominations in parliamentary elections:

*I have noticed that there was a significant difference in the last elections. It could be due to the protests and women's participation in them. Because of these protests, the youth have become more engaged, and you feel there is a youthful spirit to the revolution which had a very important influence. The elections were held early because of the youth. The revolution definitely played a role in this.*⁴⁸

Similarly, one of the independent female candidates confirmed that she has had unprecedented support from young people. She considers the outcome as a true victory for women in the closed community of Najaf. For the first time ever, men voluntarily supported the electoral campaigns of women: "The youth are now starting to accept women and be proud of their presence. I see they are proud of me. This kind of awareness makes me very happy... For a man to promote a woman, I see this as a victory. I consider us women winners, especially in the closed community of Najaf."⁴⁹

44 Ministry of Planning Central Statistical Organisation, "The Reality of Gender in Iraqi State Institutions", 2018, available at <https://cosit.gov.iq/documents/Human%20Development/gender/fullreports/%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%B9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%20%D9%81%D9%8A%20%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%20%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A4%D8%B3%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AA%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9%20%D9%81%D9%8A%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%202018.pdf>

45 Interview 22B4, politician, Baghdad – Karkh, 44 years old, bachelor's degree, former Member of Parliament, 4 December 2021 (Interview 22B4, Baghdad – Karkh politician).

46 Interview 31BS6, feminist activist, 31 years old, Basra, bachelor's degree, translator, 29 October 2021.

47 Interview 51NJ11, candidate, 40 years old, Najaf, bachelor's degree, lawyer, 6 December 2021 (Interview 51NJ11, Najaf candidate).

48 Interview 51NJ12, feminist activist, 25 years old, Najaf, master's degree, 7 October 2021.

49 Interview 51NJ3, candidate, 31 years old, Najaf, master's degree, 7 October 2021 (Interview 51NJ3, Najaf candidate).

The Women's Quota is Necessary, According to Women

The attitudes of female politicians and activists towards the women's quota and the way they want it to be handled were different from those of the political parties. While most politicians agreed on the importance of the quota in increasing women's representation and empowering them politically, it was obvious that this was simply a talking point that did not translate into action. The number of women appointed to leadership positions within party structures or executive positions did not increase. Most female respondents, both politicians and activists, agreed on the importance of the quota in promoting women's participation in politics. According to them, it is a quick and effective mechanism for increasing women's presence in parliament, the political sphere from which they have been historically excluded. Without it, women would not have participated in parliament.⁵⁰ Moreover, most of them demanded an increase in the quota, as women form half of society.⁵¹

The respondents showed that the quota system did not stop the discriminatory discourse and exclusionary practices of political parties and institutions against women. Furthermore, party leaders, still primarily men, continue to assume the task of nominating the women that will run in the elections due to the poor representation of women in decision-making positions within party structures. Most parties make sure to maintain the 25% rate without trying to go above it, despite the Constitution's explanation that the quota is a minimum. According to the interviews, female politicians consider women's representation to be an issue at both the grassroots and leadership levels:

*The quota system is a law that guarantees women's rights to participate in the political process. The law stipulates that this quota should not be less than 25% of the total number of seats, but the parties do not exceed the 25% rate, and limit women to this percentage. The women's quota today should be equal to that of men. It should be an equal half, considering the importance of women's role and their legal rights. However, there no concrete actions taken by the parties or even the UN to increase women's numbers and guarantee their right to political participation. We are still a patriarchal society, and the male citizen still feels that electing a woman makes him less of a man.*⁵²

While the respondents reaffirmed the importance of the quota as a way to increase women's presence and representation in politics, they had certain reservations about it. In their opinion, women's presence in Parliament since 2005 has not served their cause or changed society's traditional perceptions towards their participation in politics. In certain situations, discrimination against them increased. While it is true that the quota enabled women to access Parliament, most of these women lack qualifications, do not believe in women's rights and social equality, and have even opposed laws and policies that protect women's rights. The quota system in Iraq has mostly enabled women in conservative, religious parties, under the authority of the patriarchal system.⁵³ "The disadvantage of the quota system is that men control the type of women they want in Parliament."⁵⁴

One female politician stated that experience is much more important than quantity and that the quota leads to the election of candidates based on sex and not qualifications:

The quota system was a good achievement that ensured women's rights. Before it, women's share of parliamentary seats was highly negligible... The problem today is not with the number of women in Parliament or how to increase this number. Rather, our concern today is how to get women leaders into Parliament or even in leadership positions in government. Most women in politics today simply add to the numbers, because parties do not want strong, qualified women to compete with men. As such, they nominate women whose decisions they can control, women that are submissive to the party's directives, in order to guarantee a seat that fulfils the party's wishes and aspirations. That is why female parliamentarians do not have an effective role and why the political process is still dominated by men. A clear example of this is that we do not see women chairing parliamentary committees, and if a woman is nominated for such a position, she is faced with rejection and prevented by the men from assuming the position. Very few women have such roles. Additionally, there wouldn't be any women in the

⁵⁰ This was stated in nine separate author-conducted interviews.

⁵¹ Interview 51NJ3, Najaf candidate.

⁵² Interview 11N7, candidate and politician, 56 years old, Mosul, bachelor's degree, third round Member of Parliament, former member of the Nineveh Governorate Council for two cycles, currently independent, 23 December 2021 (Interview 11N7, Mosul politician).

⁵³ Julie Ballington and Azza Karam, ed., *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, A Revised Edition, The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2005, available at <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/women-in-parliament-beyond-numbers-a-revised-edition.pdf>

⁵⁴ Interview 12K7, Kirkuk politician.

current government if it weren't for the pressure exerted by the UN to appoint female ministers.⁵⁵

Some of the respondents' opinions reflected the situation of middle-class, educated women in urban areas who believe that women do not need the quota system to take part in the political process. They have the capacity to compete and gather the highest number of votes during the nomination period. Women can hold half the seats in parliament, just as they form half of society. There are many women with well-established social status, a prestigious job, and the necessary political capacities and qualifications to hold positions. The absence of a female elite is a mere pretext used by political parties.⁵⁶ Other interviews affirmed that the low representation of women in politics – and the lack of women in many cases – is caused by structural barriers that face women, regardless of their social class, age, education, religion, area of residence (rural or urban), in addition to the comprehensive systematic discrimination against women by the political parties and systems to prevent them from participating in politics.⁵⁷

According to some of the female activists, the quota system alone is not sufficient to address the issue of women's representation. A comprehensive approach is necessary. Political empowerment cannot be achieved without economic empowerment, as the latter would help women take charge of leadership roles in the labour market, promote their experiences and capacities, and push social relations and roles towards equality:

Women today are not economically empowered. They do not hold government positions. We should adopt a gradual approach. First, we start by empowering women economically so they can access higher positions in government; then, we provide them with the opportunity to access projects, loans, and investments; and, finally, we give them the chance to participate in the political process.⁵⁸

According to a statement by the representative of the International Labour Organisation during the announcement of the findings of the Iraq Labour Force Survey in July 2022, Iraqi women's participation in the workforce is the lowest globally. Only one million out of 13 million women in Iraq are employed, which is equivalent to 6.1%, compared to men's 68%.⁵⁹ A 2021 report by the Ministry of Planning in cooperation with International Labour Organisation highlighted significant sex gaps between men and women in terms of labour and paid economic activity. While 73.4% of women are capable of paid labour, they are excluded from the workforce, while the men's percentage reached 26.3%. This meant that the percentage of paid, working women out of the total of the workforce stood at only 7.6%, compared to 58% for men – that is, most of women's economic activity is unpaid labour. According to an International Labour Organisation report, Iraq ranks at the top of a 164-country list in terms of time spent by women caring for children and the household. They handle 86% of household chores, with no less than six hours of daily housework, compared to an hour or less for men.⁶⁰ Inequality in politics and the economy is interconnected. It can be dismantled by increasing women's representation in politics until they become a power capable of influencing political decisions and by implementing the appropriate interventions that empower women economically.

Political Party Criteria for Nominating Women

One of the key functions of political parties is appointing and hiring candidates for political positions. Election candidates are subject to qualifications that prove their eligibility for office, but these criteria differ from one community to another, and can

55 Interview 11N4, candidate and politician, 54 years old, Mosul, bachelor's degree, former Member of Parliament for the second and third rounds, 8 December 2021 (Interview 11N4, Mosul politician).

56 Interview 22B1, candidate, 52 years old, Baghdad, bachelor's degree, employee and activist, 16 October 2021 (Interview 22B1, Baghdad candidate).

57 This was taken from five author-conducted interviews with politicians and activists.

58 Interview 23B3, candidate, 45 years old, Baghdad, bachelor's degree, employee, 13 October 2021 (Interview 23B3, Baghdad candidate).

59 "International Labour Organization: One Million Women Work Out of 13 Million Women in Iraq", Iraqi National News Agency, 05 July 2022, available at <https://ninanews.com/Website/News/Details?Key=986180>

60 "Nine Out of Ten Women Are Not Working in the Country", KirkukNow, 5 April 2021, available at <https://kirkuknow.com/ar/news/65233#:~:text=%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%20%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%80%2013%25%20%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%20%D9%85%D9%86%20%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86%2018%20%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9%20>

even vary within the same community. It is important to verify whether these criteria directly or indirectly include forms of discrimination against women, and whether they encourage or prohibit women from engaging in politics. It is also important to examine how the parties are reacting to these criteria in light of the quota system, which imposes the nomination of a certain percentage of women, and the possible consequences parties could face if they fail to meet with the quota. The interviews have shown that there is no unified way in which parties determine the selection criteria of female candidates. Rather, they change according to the circumstances and the general situation: "These criteria change from one party to another. Today, as you know, parties could depend on X or Y, at a certain phase, and once it's over... that is why these criteria are usually temporary and not fixed."⁶¹ The most influential factor on the type of criteria parties use to nominate women was the electoral law, which changed from closed list to open list. Subsequently, the heads of political parties and blocs lost their quasi-absolute power in controlling candidates and votes. They had to adopt a set of criteria that aligned with the new law. Instead of choosing unknown, marginal, and mostly incompetent figures – because the electoral vote went to the bloc or the list –, the popular base of the candidate became the most important criterion for party leaders with the open list:

*As for the change in women's selection criteria in the recent elections, it was due to the nature of the electoral system. It was a closed system before, meaning that the citizen did not have any information about the party members and about the women on the list. Only the party leader is identified and the serial number of the voter. In case the party leader wins, the list wins. That is why political parties bring in women that are removed from the political scene and are only a female representative. However, the electoral system was changed into a multi-district (open) system where the Iraqi citizen has the capacity to research the candidates, their characteristics, differences, and strengths.*⁶²

Women often join parties upon invitation, as mentioned in many interviews. Parties usually choose women based on a strategy of increasing their chances of winning parliamentary seats. Discussed below are some of the general criteria set by most Iraqi political parties for women joining their ranks.

Sect, Kinship, and Loyalty to the Party

Despite the slogans promising of national unity and citizenship promoted by political parties before elections, these parties are actually aligned around one or many of the following: religion, sect, or national identity (being Arab or Kurdish).⁶³

*As we all know, parties are above all sectarian. The Kurd is a Kurd, the Christian is a Christian, the Shiite is a Shiite, and the Sunni is a Sunni. Can I, for instance, get nominated with a Christian party? Of course not. The first argument would be "you are not Christian." It is a mould in which we have all been locked up. These are not terms; this is reality. Can a Shiite candidate run with a Sunni party? She cannot, as she would not get five votes, and vice versa.*⁶⁴

The Sadrist Movement, which is Islamic and conservative, tried to counter its sectarian tendencies in the 2014 elections when it parted ways with the Shiite political powers and made an alliance with the Communist Party and other emerging parties, forming the Sa'iroon (we march) bloc. However, the Sadrist Movement returned to the 2021 elections on a strictly sectarian basis, stating that it would not accept any candidates unless they were 100% Sadrist. For women, it is not enough to be purely Sadrist, as they had to fulfil other criteria not imposed on men:

Every electoral experience has its own circumstances. In the previous experience with Sa'iroon, the Sadrist Movement supported any independent candidate who wanted to serve their country. Any candidate with Sa'iroon got a chance. As for the recent elections, Sayid Moktada stated that strictly Sadrist candidates will be nominated. Only those affiliated with the Sadrist Movement can be nominated in the bloc. As for women, this is not the only condition, it is only the threshold through which she can enter the nomination process. There is a competition after that. Committees made a lot of women compete to find the best candidate in terms of action, communication, clan and social status, qualifications, integrity, and other criteria in order to be chosen, in addition to diversity in expertise. For instance, not all female candidates can be chosen from the education

61 Interview 51NJ15, politician, 38 years old, Najaf, PhD, university professor, 26 December 2021.

62 Interview 22B6, Baghdad politician.

63 Hassan, "Changing the Rules of the Game".

64 Interview 31BS4, Basra candidate.

*sector, they should have varied disciplines. As a result, the best is nominated while respecting diversity.*⁶⁵

The sectarian affiliation criterion has loosened somewhat in certain regions, particularly in Baghdad, with the reduced popularity of sectarian or nationalist parties due to the shift in the people's political awareness after the October Revolution and the call to reject sectarian and political quotas. One of the politicians confirmed this by saying: "Identity and sectarian affiliations existed in the past, and they were profitable for parties. But in these last elections, numerous electoral districts, including the Al-Mansour district,* tried to abandon this way of thinking due to the dominant social culture that has become critical of it."⁶⁶

Proving and guaranteeing loyalty, including obedience to the party's leadership, is one of the most important criteria imposed by the party on female candidates. They are asked to not change parties and to work in line with the party's doctrine and its political agenda. When a woman needs support after her nomination, she is forced to obey the party later on and become loyal to its ideology. Therefore, steering clear from agendas relating to women's rights and interests is a condition to join certain parties:

*The most important criterion is ensuring her allegiance to the party after winning. This may materialize in many ways: making her sign financial receipts, and perhaps even more, such as threatening her at the social, regional, and clan level. That is why we see parties relying on the loyalty criterion before the political qualification and maturity criterion. The woman is part of the décor. When the party agrees to nominate a woman or support her, she signs a party affiliation contract and financial receipts.*⁶⁷

Parties have imposed their control in many ways to guarantee future allegiance, such as financial guarantees, by making candidates sign financial receipts and take on a mortgage. This is a method used by some of the ruling parties to force candidates into party obedience and allegiance:

*I received this news from women participating in the elections. They told me that when they wanted to join a party, they signed on a house mortgage, for instance, or a sum of 100 million [dinars], as a guarantee for remaining in the party. It is an arbitrary practice. They were surprised when they knew that our party did not impose such practices. One woman told us that she signed a paper stating that if she won the elections and wanted to quit the party, she would lose her home; another told us she had to pay 100 million [dinars].*⁶⁸

To guarantee this allegiance, certain politicians mentioned that female candidates signed non-dated resignation letters or financial papers and receipts, making the candidate a hostage of the party's leadership, forced to obey their opinions and follow them: "When the party supports you with an amount of 1,000 dinars, you are required to pay back 100 million dinars if you wanted to leave the party, among many other repercussions."⁶⁹ This happens to both men and women. However, a woman's circumstances force her to succumb more easily; women face considerably more economic and social challenges and can be blackmailed and defamed more easily due to the lack of laws protecting women from violence, the lack of easily accessible reporting mechanisms, poor enforcement of the laws, and the lack of accountability.

Partisan domination patterns do not only force female candidates to remain in the party but also confiscate their freedom in future political decision-making. On numerous occasions, certain female politicians proactively supported women's causes, only suddenly abandon them later. These women stop their advocacy after an order is issued by the party leaders to abandon this cause. This was the case of the Domestic Violence Law, when female politicians who supported the law were ordered to stop by their bloc.

Since the first parliamentary elections in 2006, most parties adopted the "political rent" approach, as party leaders exploited the nature of the closed list electoral law. These parties used women only for show, filling electoral lists with the names of their cousins to secure the highest number of parliamentary seats: "None of the parties set criteria for women based on political efficiency, expertise, and academic degrees. They are chosen based on ties of kinship, clan, and tribe."⁷⁰ Numerous female

65 Interview 31BS5, politician, 56 years old, Basra, bachelor's degree, 28 October 2021 (Interview 31BS5, Basra politician).

66 Interview 22B4, Baghdad – Karkh politician.

67 Interview 12N2, politician, 47 years old, Nineveh, bachelor's degree, Member of Parliament, 26 October 2021 (Interview 12N2, Nineveh politician).

68 Interview 23B3, Baghdad candidate.

69 Interview 51NJ6, candidate, 40 years old, Najaf, bachelor's degree, director of a humanitarian organization, 1 November 2021.

70 Interview 22B1, Baghdad candidate.

politicians confirmed that the party leaders will choose and subsequently nominate a candidate, including inviting women to become a candidate. Most women did not make the first move. Women often seize this opportunity, despite not having the required capacities and skills for political work, which is typically reserved for males. However, it remains a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to enter a world that women have always been excluded from due to male dominance. As a result, female candidates submit to the parties' control more than men and are more likely to follow orders without discussion:

Most political parties do not care what women look like, but rather who their husband, father or brother is and what their position towards the party is. One female candidate running in the third district is the daughter of a party leader. She is young and was first asked to wear a niqab in the picture, then a mask, then she removed them both. When she wins, she might be able to take off her hijab...⁷¹

Popular Base and Clan Background

"A woman with a wide popular base is always coveted by the parties for nomination in elections."⁷²

Many politicians agreed that a woman's popularity is an essential criterion for her nomination, in order to direct votes her way. As seven interviewees noted, it would be pointless to nominate a woman without popularity, as that would reduce the party's votes. In some cases, men or women are prevented from running so that their votes do not affect another candidate from the same party. Certain parties adopted this strategy in women's nomination to benefit from the quota system, particularly the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Sadrist Movement, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and the Taqaddam (progress) Party.

One of the most important criteria set by political parties for women's nomination is their clan background. The stronger the clan and the more influence it has in attracting votes during the nomination period, the stronger the woman's status is within the party. The same applies for the social relationships and the networking that the candidate does in order to obtain the largest possible number of votes. This is an element of strength for the party.⁷³

Parties believe that certain categories of working women have a better chance of winning, including: school principals, especially from villages and rural areas (as mentioned in four interviews); media figures; academics; civic activists, particularly those from the October Revolution; and readers of Shiite religious poems. It seems at first glance that the employment positions, circumstances, and backgrounds of these women vary widely and may be quite removed from the work of political parties and activity. However, the priority for parties is gathering candidates that could garner the largest number of votes; a woman's prior experience and political understanding are less relevant as she will be trained and indoctrinated in the party's ideology:

The only thing they see in a woman is her electoral weight, how many votes she can obtain – that is, they value her popularity, rather than her efficiency. A reader at a Hussein commemoration (mulaya) is desired by parties, as well as women who own beauty centres, regardless of their level of education, because they interact with a large number of women; school principals are also a preferred choice, not because of their profession, but because they have other female teachers with them at school. They consider women the means and not the end.⁷⁴

Politicians stated in their interviews that parties currently aim to recruit women with social skills and who communicate with large segments of society. It is not only their professions that count, but also their family and clan status. Almost every interview with a politician includes the word "weight" when talking about women's nomination criteria:

We prefer women with talking and persuasion abilities, who can communicate and connect with the different segments and classes of society, with a wide popular base, whether through their clan or relatives, preferably around 200 or 300 people. We want them to be able to go on TV and win the hearts of hundreds of thousands, to be sociable, educated, and persuasive, with

⁷¹ Interview 51NJ3, Najaf candidate.

⁷² Interview 12K10, politician, 50 years old, Kirkuk, bachelor's degree, former minister, 21 December 2021 (Interview 12K10, Kirkuk politician).

⁷³ Interview 22B4, Baghdad – Karkh politician.

⁷⁴ Interview 51NJ5, Najaf politician.

*the literary courage to speak and convince people with their speech. TV talks are not easy. These are all reasons that could influence selection, in addition to clan. If the woman belongs to a clan, or if she has an audience, if she is a school principal, she would have around 500 students who could possibly influence one or two or three persons at home; that's 500 times 3. We now have 1,500 votes. That's why women need to fulfil certain criteria in order to be nominated by the party, which cannot nominate a woman that would only get them 100 votes. What would the party do with 100 votes?*⁷⁵

According to political parties, the “perfect female politician” who wants to enter politics is currently the one who increases her party's chances of acceding to parliament through her connections, whether social, professional, or familial. The role of the parties here is to search for these already well-equipped women and invite them to join their ranks. These parties do not seem focused on empowering women through trainings, education, and the development of their political capacities. Should one of them implement a training programme, the main objective would be to empower women to only win the elections, “which is the main goal of the party”, while disregarding all other aspects of empowerment and the required skills for female politicians to improve their performance in the political field. For this reason, women with advanced skills in communicating with the public were chosen, while others were excluded.⁷⁶

Hijab or Objectification: Women's Bodies as a Symbol of Political Identity

*“A woman's outfit has to be to the partisan bloc's liking. Many people told me to wear a hijab.”*⁷⁷

The discussion over the hijab is far from resolved in feminist literature. Some completely oppose the idea of the hijab, considering it to be a sign of the oppression and persecution that Muslim women are subjected to, while others defend the woman's right to wear whatever she feels reflects her religious or cultural identity. The issue is more complex than it seems. The hijab narrative cannot be explained by the religious perspective without considering the intertwining contexts of history, politics, and economy within the struggles and interactions between eastern and western societies. The hijab is not only a piece of cloth covering women's bodies; it is used to reflect the identity of entire communities and countries. It is a symbol that serves multiple purposes, dividing women into “covered”, representing piety and humility, and “non-covered”, representing rebellion and a rejection of religious values. In the patriarchal field of politics, the hijab goes beyond the religious dimension: it is a marketing strategy targeted at religious groups to gain political power.⁷⁸

Both men and women are subject to social standards and must answer to the expectations of society and the required rules of conduct. Society maintains social standards through social sanctions for both sexes. The hijab – particularly the headscarf – imposed on women in Muslim societies is one of the most important social symbols that women need to comply with as one of the tools used for differentiation. There are determinants imposed on men as well, but the hijab becomes a means to discriminate between people and a justification to exclude women and violate their rights when arbitrarily imposed. Women do not have the free will or the right to choose to wear or remove the hijab.⁷⁹

The double standard is obvious in the political parties, which focus on a woman's appearance and consider an “appropriate” appearance necessary for a woman's presence in the party. The parties reinforce existing appearance stereotypes for women and use them for their own purposes. The image of the perfect woman produced by political parties is often veiled, or wearing a burqa, while the non-veiled woman, or the woman that does not abide by the dress code, is subjected to rejection, according to a female candidate from Basra. She confirms having been subjected to massive pressure for not wearing the hijab:

⁷⁵ Interview 12K9, politician, 61 years old, Kirkuk, bachelor's degree in engineering, former governorate councilman, official in the political office of a religious political party, 19 December 2021.

⁷⁶ Interview 22B6, Baghdad politician.

⁷⁷ Interview 31BS4, Basra candidate.

⁷⁸ Zulfatun Ni'mah, “The Political Meaning of the Hijab Style of Women Candidates,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol.40 No.1, pp. 174-197, April 2021, available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/1868103421989071>

⁷⁹ Ruqaya Diallo, “Do the Demands of the Feminist Movement Express the Views of Muslim Women?”, *Noon Post*, 14 March 2018, available at <https://www.noonpost.com/content/22472>

There are certain conditions related to dress code that are not announced officially. Women have to wear a specific costume. How many public, non-veiled female figures are there in Basra? Just me. I was the first to have her picture torn. The parties were the ones who did it, and particularly one rigid, religious party. Women's dress code is dictated by the partisan bloc that nominate them. Many people told me to wear a hijab, but I refused. When asked why, particularly during the elections period, I said that if I wear it now, the entire community will call me a hypocrite because they know that I do not normally wear it.⁸⁰

A clear pattern appeared in most interviews with religious parties and others who considered the hijab as one of the criteria that increase the acceptance of women's presence in parties. The hijab is linked to the religious and sectarian identity of the party. In Najaf, for instance, the abaya is imposed along with the hijab. The respondents mentioned that this is not considered very important at the beginning of the woman's entry into the party. Parties often dictate changes to a female member's appearance after she joins if it is not already aligned with their preferences. This is done while also acquainting her with the party's agenda during activities specifically designed for this purpose. Female respondents focused more on this criterion in our interviews than their male counterparts did: "One woman in an Islamic movement did not wear the abaya, but she was forced to. Religious and regional affiliations are very important, but appearance is not, as the party can always change a woman's appearance later on."⁸¹

Responses differed somewhat in the interviews with the Kurdish and Turkman parties in Kirkuk. Respondents mentioned that parties sometimes cared more for an "elegant" appearance and outfit, rather than imposing the hijab on candidates. This is due to the nature of the Kurdish woman's traditional outfit, as it does not normally impose strict head-covering clothing and is characterised by bright colours. The context for women differs from one region to another within the Kirkuk governorate, according to one female politician in a tribal, rural area inhabited by Muslim Arabs. The hijab and modest clothing are compulsory for women there. Choosing whether or not to wear the hijab is not even up for debate. Women agree with the idea that a dress code is a social necessity that precedes religion. It expresses identity and group or clan affiliation:

First, there are general criteria such as age, education, social status in the area, cultural and social background, and the woman's presence on the field. It is not logical to nominate a candidate that does not exist in real life. She needs to have certain characteristics. Second, and this is also a general criterion, you have nationalist affiliation. For example, I come from an Arab region and was nominated by an Arab party. These are interconnected issues. As for clothing, it not a criterion per se, but a certain type of attire must be respected. Clothing items that are religiously appropriate and linked to the clan's customs and traditions. My region is entirely made out of clans, and I come from a renowned family that applies customs and traditions to the letter.⁸²

The patriarchal political systems impose their hijab-related ideology along with other discriminatory practices against women by encouraging official and unofficial institutions of social education to instil perceived social differences between men and women.⁸³ The issue of the hijab thus becomes a purely political matter. Is the freedom to wear or remove the hijab actually an individual choice or right, or is it a public matter related to society and its identity? It is not easy to analyse the issue of hijab without first examining the private and public contexts that impact women. In many cases, the hijab is a woman's only option – notably in conservative communities – to achieve her goals and enter the public, traditionally male sphere. The hijab helps avoid the punishment and pressure imposed on non-veiled women. One female candidate from Basra said that the dress code and the hijab were not a precondition for nomination, as all the women are already veiled. It is the usual attire of women, without any imposition:

I did not witness any of this. More than one party offered me to join them without any conditions relating to my appearance. This is personal freedom. During these elections, when I entered a room with all the political parties and their male and female candidates, all the women had shown up in their usual attire. This is my freedom, no one can impose such a thing on me. Ninety-nine percent of us female candidates are veiled and do not wear make-up. Even those who wear a modern version of the hijab are still considered veiled, and there are differences between the various sects of course.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Interview 31BS4, Basra candidate.

⁸¹ Interview 12N3, candidate and politician, 60 years old, Mosul, bachelor's degree, former Member of Parliament and current civil activist, 26 November 2021 (Interview 12N3, Mosul politician).

⁸² Interview 12K13, candidate and politician, 45 years old, Kirkuk, bachelor's degree, Member of Parliament, 15 November 2021.

⁸³ For instance, the Iraqi Ministry of Education added the topic of hijab to the Islamic Education curriculum for the fifth grade boys and girls, describing the veiled woman as virtuous, and the non-veiled woman as being in the wrong, meaning that the veiled woman has higher value and status than her non-veiled counterpart.

⁸⁴ Interview 31BS3, candidate, 57 years old, Umm Qasr – Basra, bachelor's degree, educational supervisor, 19 October 2021 (Interview 31BS3, Umm Qasr – Basra candidate).

But the margin of freedom that the respondent mentioned does not match the concept and definition of freedom as “independent free will”. Women’s bodies have always been a political and cultural battlefield aiming to keep them submissive. The Islamic political powers succeeded in this regard in Basra. After the fall of the secular Baath regime in 2003, the Islamic parties and their armed factions formed an alliance with the clans to control the Basra governorate and its economic resources. These parties imposed their conservative, Islamic ideology, while entrenching clan values that are discriminatory against women. The worsening security situation coincided with the Islamic parties’ practices to force their agenda on women’s lives and choices. Women who walked the streets without a hijab were threatened with severe punishment by armed groups. Moreover, Basra witnessed the killing of many women through the following years.⁸⁵ By contrast, a female politician from Baghdad confirmed that political parties set specific terms and conditions to accept female candidates, including the Islamic attire and the hijab: “As for the other parties, yes, they have other terms and conditions. The Islamic parties are certainly looking for women with an Islamic background in terms of their way of thinking, their clothes, their stances, their speech, and other similar details... So yes, there are specific criteria.”⁸⁶

Furthermore, certain political parties address the issue of women’s physical appeal and consider it as a weakness for the party: “I do not think that political parties set a criterion for the candidate’s personal beauty. However, they do try to steer clear from attractive women, as they believe this weakens the party (laugh). This applies to all political parties, whether they are Islamic or civic.”⁸⁷ If the candidate is physically appealing, instances of harassment, and sometimes even blackmail, increase: “Women suffer from constant harassment, especially if they are beautiful and attractive. We noticed a lot of cases of harassment against female candidate. Because we are a closed-minded society, when a female candidate asks someone to vote for her or support her, they will try to get something out of it. Perhaps they will get nothing, but there are clear insinuations.”⁸⁸ Incidents of this kind have already happened, which force a party to allocate time and resources to solve them – that is, if they decided to continue supporting the candidate in the first place. In certain cases, parties abandon candidates who do not wish to receive this support.

The beauty or physical appeal factor in politics creates a false dichotomy for voters: either choose a beautiful woman or a competent politician. This idea preferences women’s reproductive role and presents the idea that politics does not have room for femininity. Moreover, it reinforces the idea of linking honour to women’s bodies, which threatens the group that the woman in question belongs to. The Iraqi political environment reinforces this stereotype of women, excluding them from political and decision-making roles and restricting them to men.

Social Notions of Competence and Good Conduct

When talking about women’s competence in the “male” political field, it is important to consider the obstacles that female politicians have faced, and continue to face, including the patriarchal political structure, difficulty accessing resources, discriminatory laws, educational and economic barriers, and violence against women. These factors hinder women’s empowerment in politics. The political competence concept is interpreted in many different ways by respondents. The majority of the politicians who mentioned this criterion agreed that the competencies required to enter the party include leadership skills, bravery, boldness, education, integrity, political awareness, and knowledge of partisan and administrative work. Some mentioned good conversational skills, the ability to persuade and influence, and charisma as indicators of competence. For a female politician, these criteria are looked at alongside her success in her “traditional” social roles at home; indeed, according to the secretary-general of one of the Najaf parties, this is the number one criterion. Success at the personal level, in the household, in child-rearing, and in caregiving represents a basic measure of a woman’s qualification for political action, in addition to success at the professional level, in sectors like health and education:

*We have a test for women: as successful mothers, we ask about their role in her household and in their community. These are all points that go in their favour. It is not logical for a woman to preside over a community when she fails in her household, socially, or professionally. We completely exclude needy, consumerist, lazy, and unproductive women. They are not welcome in my party.*⁸⁹

85 Reuters, “Basra Women Fear Militants Behind Wave of Killings”, 4 December 2007, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-basra-feature-idUSL0365389520071205>

86 Interview 23B5, candidate, 42 years old, Baghdad, bachelor’s degree, media figure, independent, 20 November 2021 (Interview 23B5, Baghdad candidate).

87 Interview 22B4, Baghdad – Karkh politician.

88 Interview 12N2, Nineveh politician.

89 Interview 51NJ5, Najaf politician.

The majority of respondents agreed that competence is not a priority for accepting entry into a party, despite its importance. Parties place loyalty and popularity first. According to certain respondents, a lower level of competence can be overlooked with regard to legislative seats, although it is important for executive seats.⁹⁰

Turning to the concept of good conduct, the representatives of religious parties discussed “good conduct” in the context of its legal meaning – that is, not having any previous offences, misdemeanours, or crimes in the candidates’ resume. In their opinion, this criterion is linked to good reputation, physical appearance, and attire for female candidates, and is considered an important condition for membership in religious parties, which rely on religious ideology to gain the loyalty of their followers and popular base. These parties try very hard to show religious commitment to avoid losing public support.

Women's Roles in Political Parties

Political party leaders are usually gatekeepers who distribute the roles within the party and ruling authorities:

*The roles that women play depend on the party leader's personality and openness towards or opinion on female members. If the leader of the party is religious, he will certainly look at women from a religious point of view and from his own religious perspective on women, whereas if the party leader is civic, he will of course be more open-minded. It all depends on the ideology of the party, whether secular or Islamic. This is due to the patriarchal nature of political work, which does not allow for women to reach or hold leadership positions or positions in the executive committee. Female members are only entrusted with women's affairs within the party.*⁹¹

Politicians talk about the roles of women and their (albeit very limited) presence in leadership positions in a hierarchal manner, using expressions implying that the secretaries-general and leaders of political parties and other entities “grant” women the right to candidacy and the right to hold senior administrative positions, “give space” to women, allow women “to be present with” men in parties, and “give” women leadership positions (terms pulled from seven interviews). Hierarchical and patriarchal tendencies are evident in political discourse. Despite politicians’ attempts to show the positive image of women’s participation in decision-making, members of one political party that will not be named (a party not in power and with decreased popularity) mentioned that, as an officially stated policy of this party, woman cannot assume positions of leadership over men and may only lead other women.⁹²

Enabling women to reach political positions does not resolve the problem. In most societies around the world, women still face obstacles relating to the patriarchal rules and standards that govern and shape political institutions:

*Most parties do not give women a role in any discussion, nor do they involve women in decision-making. For instance, in a particular party, there are women who said that they do not know what happens behind closed doors and that they merely hear about what takes place from others. I asked them whether they participate, for example, in certain discussions. Their answer was, “No, we only receive a WhatsApp message about the matter.” Can you imagine a party that directs, manages, and organizes its affairs via WhatsApp?*⁹³

One of the most prominent issues are the stereotypes surrounding women’s attributes and roles, whereby women are perceived to have qualities such as kindness, tenderness, and motherliness, while men are firm, reasonable, and decisive. There is a clear preference for masculine attributes over feminine ones. Such simplified perceptions control the attitudes of voters towards female candidates and politicians, not to mention that they are practiced within parties as well.

90 Interview 12K10, Kirkuk politician.

91 Interview 51NJ5, Najaf politician.

92 Interview 23B6, politician, Baghdad – Karkh, 35 years old, PhD, member of a political party bureau, 20 November 2021 (Interview 23B6, Baghdad – Karkh politician).

93 Interview 23B3, Baghdad candidate. For more information, see other statements by members of parliament at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0syp-pWZ9Ytk> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58zKeS2Wqll>

A clear pattern appeared in the responses: the stereotypical roles for women within parties foster their caregiving social-role through activities such as distributing humanitarian aid, conducting awareness and promotional activities for the party, and communicating with women from the public. Women take on: work within the party and in governmental authorities related to education, the party's promotional campaigns, public relations, the media; work in humanitarian offices related to human rights and women's affairs; and work with civil society organizations:

The role of women is purely educational. Given mothers are women, they represent the cornerstone of education as they raise future generations. Education occurs within educational institutions such as the Muslim Women's Association and supplementary schools, through which women become active by participating in cultural and educational programmes and entertainment, women's and girls' contributions, in addition to their involvement in culture, reading, human rights, and the rights of Muslims and women.⁹⁴

Women usually run offices concerned with women's affairs within political parties. As for their role in Parliament, women are usually members and sometimes chairpersons of committees relating to a woman's reproductive role (i.e., committees related to humanitarian issues and women's affairs), such as committees on education; human rights; and women, family, and children (as mentioned in 18 interviews). However, women are generally excluded from ministerial positions and membership of committees related to fields of a sovereign nature, such as security and defence committees, as well as oil, foreign affairs, and finance. Several women have managed to break this pattern of exclusion in some fields, particularly in the financial sector, and have assumed leadership positions, although generally women are still excluded from these so-called sovereign committees. By contrast, committees related to civil society, human rights, women, family, and children are considered fragile committees in the Parliament and are difficult to form.⁹⁵ These sectors are believed to tackle secondary issues rather than issues of priority, according to the dominant patriarchal perspective in political thought.

Women are excluded from political action through customs and stereotypes. Political parties restrict women's freedoms and control their personal decisions, assuming that women are unable to travel and carry out tasks as men do. Many female politicians confirmed that they were subjected to systematic marginalization by being excluded from meetings, especially those held at night or requiring travel, under the pretext that men customarily ensure the safety of women and safeguard their reputation, which in this case takes the form of not inviting them at all to meetings in which political action is planned (as mentioned in three interviews); this is all assuming that a woman has managed the difficult task of becoming a member of a political or administrative offices. The stereotype that portrays women as unable to travel and go out at night is commonly used in political circles as a pretext for excluding women from leadership positions and political bureaus.

This exclusion is so pervasive that many female politicians withdrew and resigned from their parties because they were marginalized and excluded from decision-making processes, especially after their demands to be included in meetings for drafting policies and political action plans had been disregarded. This is especially true for women who follow feminist agendas:

The roles of women are mostly a formality... Unfortunately, examining the roles given to women within emerging parties in-depth reveals that women are completely excluded from closed meetings, meetings determining the party's course of action, ideological meetings, and meetings for dividing administrative, professional, and functional roles within these parties. Such decisions are made in advance and only communicated to women after the fact. The same applies to evening meetings that emerging parties might hold. This happened to me personally. On one occasion, they held a very detailed meeting for the movement in Babil province, but I was not informed. I later learned that all members of the movement had attended except me, despite the fact that I am a member of the political bureau, and every member of a political bureau is supposed to be involved in the process of general policymaking for the party. I asked them why they did not inform me of the meeting, and they answered that they were afraid I would travel alone! We are not in kindergarten; we are in a political arena fraught with countless risks and problems. How can we proceed if the men agree among themselves that a woman cannot go out at night?! From the beginning, I gave them the impression that I am a decisive woman capable of traveling anywhere and at any time. If they were truly in search of strong women in the movement, they should have contacted me first and informed me of the meeting. That is the case for most of the women in these political parties. Today, there is a lack of female representation within parties. Unfortunately, the decisions are made and issued in advance, and women have to sign and approve (with a smile). It is due to this poor organizational policy that I sadly withdrew twice from the movement. When I withdrew the first time, they should have supported me and given me full freedom in the movement in order to return. However, they reneged on their promises. On the contrary, the problem became worse, so I ended my membership in the party because of the poor

94 Interview 23B2, politician, Baghdad, 45 years old, bachelor's degree, teacher, 7 October 2021.

95 Female Members of Parliament – Focus Group

*administrative organization.*⁹⁶

Some politicians have tried to show that their parties adopt an equality approach with regards to the roles assigned to women and men, but it is clear that this only occurs at the level of political discourse. In reality, different roles are given to women and men within the party's internal organization and when dealing with the community. A statement by a politician from a traditional Islamic party emphasised that the roles of women and men are governed by "nature" and that it is difficult for a woman to be in a position of responsibility leading a group of men, as this is undesirable:

*In fact, the roles assigned to women in the movement are the same as those assigned to men in terms of executive and organizational work. Of course, that is within the areas allocated to women's action. For instance, the eastern and rural environment does not allow women to lead men. This would be undesirable or difficult to achieve. That is why, in the organizational entities, we have separated men's roles from women's roles. We established a department specifically for women across Iraq. This department only focuses on women's affairs within the movement. In other institutions and entities, women and men enjoy equal opportunities, and there is no preference for men over women. On the contrary, there are indeed equal opportunities in any task in the movement. If there is a woman with better experience than the man occupying a certain position, she is given priority.*⁹⁷

Women try to access the political field in various ways, but they face different and sometimes unreconcilable challenges. On one hand, if they try to identify themselves with the male characteristics of political performance, they are accused of being aggressive and harsh. On the other hand, if women do not adhere to the standards of male political performance, they face violent reactions accusing them of being emotional and weak and of lacking the ability to make crucial political decisions. Therefore, the performance of some female politicians is complex, and they are nevertheless excluded from decision-making positions (in senior political bodies) within parties:

*This depends on the party and the activities it participates in. Few parties allow women to be present within the leadership body. There might be one, two, or up to three women only compared to many men, whose number can go up to 15. Moreover, women's work is usually limited to stereotypical roles rather than principal roles. The leadership body determines the party's strategies, views, principles, and actions. Only Kurdish parties give women a major role in setting the party's policies and principles as well as in decision-making.*⁹⁸

The Glass Ceiling: Women and Positions of Power

Despite the legal guarantees of equality between men and women in holding positions of power, women are still seen as incapable of assuming leadership positions. Their voices are not heard, and their contributions are marginalized. Meanwhile, men are seen as competent and capable of managing important and crucial issues such as the economy, military forces, and foreign affairs. Female politicians and activists emphasised that women's roles are confined to a specific level, whereby they are not allowed to hold positions of power and senior leadership:

*There are no roles for women to play at all. I do not belong to any particular party, but I assume that their roles are non-existent. We have never seen a partisan woman stand and talk about her party in an intellectual manner we can relate to. The reason behind this, as I mentioned earlier, is that women are marginalised. In social studies, there is a term called "the glass ceiling". Women in a party, government, public administrations, or parliament have a limit they are allowed to reach. If a woman reaches this limit, she is not allowed to cross it. This is what we refer to as the glass ceiling. Women in a certain party or in parliament or who work in any ministry or body have a limit referred to as the glass ceiling; a limit restricting their speech and their movement to a certain level, beyond which they have no rights.*⁹⁹

For women in politics, this glass ceiling consists of obstacles based in sexism that stand in the way of women advancing towards senior positions within political institutions, despite having the required capabilities and skills.¹⁰⁰ Women have faced

⁹⁶ Interview 23B5, Baghdad candidate.

⁹⁷ Interview 23B6, Baghdad – Karkh politician.

⁹⁸ Interview 12N3, Mosul politician.

⁹⁹ Interview 31BS4, Basra candidate.

¹⁰⁰ Irina Zamfirache, "Women and Politics – The Glass Ceiling", *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 2010, pp. 175-185.

these barriers since childhood; they are generated by formal and informal civil institutions that produce and reinforce stereotypes about the roles and characteristics that are appropriate for women. Girls are taught that marriage and family are a priority, while belittling the importance of their roles outside the home. As women are preoccupied with their reproductive role, they are deprived of the crucial resources for empowerment, such as time and money, due to their responsibility of caring for the family; men have these resources readily available to them. Thus, women usually lag behind men in building their capabilities and seeking opportunities, which is in turn used both as a pretext and justification for excluding women from leadership positions in political parties. However, it is unreasonable for political parties to generalize this perception for all women and view them as less capable or less competent than men. Competent female leaders, who have been able to overcome the challenges they faced based on their sex, are regarded as incompetent simply because they are women; under the glass ceiling, the highest position that women can reach is leading women's offices and assuming other secondary roles.

According to a politician from Basra, equality exists between men and women, but it is limited to the tasks and services that female politicians must perform at the lower management levels, known as "horizontal equity": "Women have held many positions in parties based on their affiliation and their history in the party. It is unreasonable for a woman to join and hold a privileged position all in one day; there is a gradual process to take into account."¹⁰¹ In upper management positions, there are virtually no women at all:

*In Basra, we currently have nine positions, nearly half of which are held by women, and the others by men. We do not treat women based on their sex, but rather as members of the Iraqi Parliament. The responsibilities we give to men are the same as those we give to women in terms of service and communication. Women in our party are required to perform their service in the same way men are, and work is divided equally among the members, whether men or women...*¹⁰²

Parties' weak faith in women and their lack of institutional organization is the main reason why women play secondary roles, despite possessing the required political skills and professional competence. This was emphasised by a politician from Baghdad, who said:

*Most of the roles women play within political parties are based on the principle of personal relationships that link the female candidate or politician to the party's leadership. This is due to the weak institutional and partisan organization, and that is why parties do not rely on professionalism. In addition, most of the roles assumed by women within political parties are secondary, due to the patriarchal nature prevailing in political parties. Nonetheless, there are competent women who have all the required political competencies in parties, but these political parties and their leaders do not believe that women are capable of being active pioneers and leaders.*¹⁰³

Political Party Programmes for Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is so vital that the fifth goal of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development set by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs is "achieving social equality and empower[ing] all women and girls".¹⁰⁴ Women increase their own self-determination and control over their lives by developing their skills and increasing their capabilities, gaining access to resources and opportunities, and harnessing their ability to use these tools to make strategic choices and pursue their ambitions.¹⁰⁵ The three main elements of empowerment are resources, the ability to change, and achievement. In the field of political empowerment of women, the focus is on providing opportunities and resources for women, building their expertise and skills, and ensuring that political decisions do not violate women's freedom of opinion; the ultimate hope in empowerment is improving the circumstances of women by providing opportunities, resources, independence, and free choice.

¹⁰¹ Interview 12K4, politician, Kirkuk, 53 years old, PhD, former member of a governorate council, 20 December 2021.

¹⁰² Interview 31BS5, Basra politician.

¹⁰³ Interview 22B4, Baghdad – Karkh politician.

¹⁰⁴ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", adopted 25 September 2015, available at <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

¹⁰⁵ Amartya Sen, "Markets and Freedoms: Achievements and Limitations of the Market Mechanism in Promoting Individual Freedoms", Oxford Economic Papers, Vol. 45, No. 4, 1993, p. 531; European Institute for Gender Equality, "Concepts and Definitions", available at <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/concepts-and-definitions>

Political parties tend to encourage and support women's issues in their discourse, and the interviewed politicians were asked about the programmes they carry out in this regard. Some mentioned the lack of women's empowerment programmes in their party's agenda (as mentioned in 12 interviews), while others spoke of the activities that their political party carries out in the field of women's empowerment, whether in the form of educational courses on the party's work and on advocacy skills (mentioned in 11 interviews), or in the form of media appearances and leadership (mentioned in 5 interviews). Many politicians talked about their party's efforts to hold vocational workshops for women in the local community, such as teaching sewing, hairdressing, cooking, and driving, as well as organizing field visits to widows and families in need, distributing food packages, and providing humanitarian aid (mentioned in 3 interviews). Most participants mentioned that the role of women's empowerment was mainly undertaken by international and local organizations, while some politicians went further, believing that women's empowerment is not the party's responsibility.

On the other side, some respondents mentioned that they work in cooperation with civil organizations, scientific institutions, or research centres through which they work on women's issues. Some are members of the Sadrist Movement and the Wisdom (Al Hikma) Movement. There were no differences in the answers among participants from different governorates. However, differences arose between parties based on their ideological backgrounds and the prevailing perceptions that are usually linked to religion. For instance, one female candidate from Basra stated that one of the programmes she worked on relating to women's empowerment was a campaign to encourage polygyny, because she believes that this would reduce corruption. She mentioned that she was met with opposition from women and expressed her astonishment and dissatisfaction from such opposition.¹⁰⁶ Another politician from a religious party in Najaf stated that he cannot accept the empowerment of women at the expense of their family's care, and that a woman's success in her work is not acceptable if she fails to perform her domestic responsibilities. He believes that a woman's success in her home and work is a matter of great importance, which cannot be achieved by a man. He also mentioned that successful women are rewarded with a higher religious status that a man cannot attain.¹⁰⁷ Two more politicians – one from an Arab Shiite religious party in Kirkuk and the other from an Arab Sunni party – expressed similar views; the latter stated that he does not accept the idea of a woman from his family working in politics because he believes that female politicians are exposed to a clear violation of their honour.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, two politicians from a Kurdish party in Kirkuk mentioned that they had worked hard in support of a previous programme aimed at imposing harsher penalties for perpetrators of honour killings. They also stated that their party is now working on issuing the Domestic Violence Law after it was successfully passed in the Kurdistan region.¹⁰⁹ The Communist Party shares similar views, and politicians from both of these parties expressed their belief in the principle of equality. Some religious parties (such as the Da'wa Party) explained the lack of programmes to empower women as a result of their party working with "elite" women, meaning that there is no need to empower the female candidates who are members of the party.

The claims parties make on working towards women's empowerment, and their frankly superficial recognition of its importance, came only after the persistent efforts of civil society organizations, feminist movements, and international organizations, which held myriad conferences, workshops, and campaigns urging women to be involved in the political field and within parties:

In the fourth round of elections, we were deprived of training. Had it not been for civil society organizations and the UN, we would not have been able to acquire knowledge, for example, about how to legislate, propose and amend laws, and how the oversight process takes place, as well as about the Resolution 1325 plan to help women and empower them economically and politically. We would not have known about any of these issues had it not been for the workshops and trainings that the organizations carried out occasionally. In previous sessions, upon becoming members of Parliament, both men and women participated in training courses related to parliamentary, oversight, legislative, and representative functions. They even educated them on matters of etiquette and protocol. However, we frankly received very little training, and this was provided by civil society organizations, not by the parties or by Parliament, which did not offer any training at all.¹¹⁰

This includes national plans to implement Resolution 1325, which culminated in several recommendations of which a few have been implemented, such as the call to establish an office concerned with women's affairs within the structure of political parties – as mentioned by many participants in the interviews – with the primary role of monitoring, following-up and evalu-

106 Interview 31BS3, Umm Qasr – Basra candidate.

107 Interview 51NJ5, Najaf politician.

108 Interview 12K1, politician, Kirkuk, 65 years old, bachelor's degree, ministerial adviser, 25 November 2021.

109 Interview 12K10, Kirkuk politician.

110 Interview 23B7, female candidate.

ating women's participation in decision-making within the party.¹¹¹ However, women in these parties were merely instructed to work in the interest of the party and in accordance with the directives of their leader, instead of working in favour of women's issues: "The political discourse towards women is not reflected in reality. It is a media stunt. Name a single party that has allowed the advancement of women and given them the opportunity to do anything! Even if they allow a woman to hold the position of minister, which is considered a high position, she does not have any powers. Can you go out shopping with no money?"¹¹²

According to the interviews, most of the programmes or activities organised by parties for women, such as education on the party's work and principles, lack the ability to effect change and fulfil the objective of improving the conditions of women. Moreover, these programmes and activities do not comply with the principles of free choice, participation in decision-making, and access to and management of resources. These programmes and activities are ineffective and do not address the structural causes of women's marginalization and exclusion from positions of power.¹¹³

Access to Economic Resources: An Obstacle and a Pathway in Women's Political Participation

Policies Exacerbating Women's Poverty

Women's economic activity rate in 2018 in Iraq reached 12.6%, compared to 72.7% for men, according to data from the Iraqi Poverty Monitoring and Evaluation Survey carried out by the Ministry of Planning. The female unemployment rate was 31.0% (unemployment refers to no work or unpaid work). Among female wage workers, most working women are employed in the public sector, at a rate of 89.6%. By contrast, men are offered work opportunities in various sectors, and the percentage of male workers in the public sector versus other sectors is 43.6%.¹¹⁴ This disparity in work opportunities and fields is due to the prevailing social systems and norms, which direct women towards working in public health, education and sometimes financial sectors, while customarily excluding them from work in other sectors, thus weakening women's economic resources. Government authorities often made social-insensitive decisions in an attempt to overcome economic crises after the increase in expenditures on the military sector in 2014 and subsequent years. They resorted to reducing the salary scale for the public sector in 2015, imposing taxes and deductions on employees, and later raising the US dollar exchange rate. These measures mostly affected women, as the demographic that most depended on the public sector as their main source of income. In addition, authorities are not concerned with the service work performed by women for no pay, such as agricultural work in rural areas and unpaid domestic work, according to existing social and political norms. The government also adopted economic policies that stimulate the market and investments in building infrastructure, albeit weak, rather than focusing investments on eradicating poverty, health, and education, which are often burdens carried by women. The disregard of these sectors exacerbates inequality and weakens the participation of women in decision-making. Moreover, the rentier economy and the state's reliance on oil as a main source of income have led to a clear recession in various sectors and have restricted revenues to certain institutions in which women are excluded from decision-making processes, as the percentage of women working in the Ministry of Oil for example does not exceed 10%.

Violent conflicts usually cause inflation in rentier economies due to the increasing number of female heads of households, increasing disabilities due to acts of violence, immigration, and displacement. Women traditionally bear this burden on behalf of the state and get little to no recognition for their work. The Iraqi government does not recognize the domestic work carried out by women in its labour laws and fiscal statistics, thus disregarding another element of Goal 5 of the Agenda for Sustainable Development, which requires equal pay for equal working hours.

111 Sundus Abbas, "Women's Political Participation: The Missing Piece of Accomplishment," United Nations Development Programme, 10 April 2019, available at: https://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/ar/home/presscenter/articles/2019/04/10/women_s-political-participation--the-missing-piece-of-accomplish.html

112 Interview 31BS4, Basra candidate.

113 Al Hurra Exclusive, "Women's Chances in the Iraqi Elections: Slogans of Empowerment and the Absence of Programmes," 26 October 2021, available at <https://www.alhurra.com/iraq/2021/10/06/>

114 The figures and statistics were taken from the Central Statistical Organisation, "Poverty Monitoring and Evaluation Survey in Iraq," 2018, available at <http://cosit.gov.iq/documents/>

Money As Power

Even the support that female candidates receive, such as political deals and money to finance their campaigns, strengthens parties' patriarchal authority, as women are still compelled to obey the orders of male party leaders in exchange for such support.¹¹⁵ The difference in the economic balance of power between women and men in the political field has an undeniable impact on the opportunities available to women, especially female politicians, not only in their power to make decisions and bring about change, but also in building and refining their skills and presenting their ideas in all levels of decision-making discussions. One female candidate stated that the issue of finances often affected her mental health, self-confidence, and ability to face other challenges in communicating with politicians and the public, as well as responding to insults and provocative questions. She believes that it is a necessary resource to refine her skills, not to mention that economic differences give the impression that female politicians are less competent and less capable of leading than male politicians.¹¹⁶

Moreover, the need for financial resources to be able to compete in politics often prompts women to join parties, which then imposes further obligations related to party work; this is now in addition to their previously existing domestic responsibilities as well as any work they do for income. This leaves them with less time. Therefore, the economic factor often stands as an obstacle to women joining the political field, further weakening their opportunities to express their points of view at decision-making forums and strengthening patriarchal regimes.¹¹⁷

For a woman of intellect pushing a certain political agenda, making the decision to run for office and compete in the elections requires money. In the 2021 elections, the term "political money" was used widely among the Iraqi population in reference to after the astronomical amounts spent by the parties in power on propaganda, and reflecting the idea that party leaders control the political money, which is allocated in the absence of female leadership. According to Iraq's political map of the strongest parties and alliances holding parliamentary seats, these parties are headed by groups of religious, military, or national leaders, tribal sheikhs, or businessmen.¹¹⁸ The only dominant political bloc with female leadership is the New Generation Movement, which won nine out of a total of 329 parliamentary seats, despite the number of female politicians in the political arena: "There are women who think of establishing a political party, but the first challenge they face is the economic aspect, in addition to other far greater challenges. There are large, well-established, and deep-rooted parties that dominate the political arena. It is not easy for a woman to establish a party without support."¹¹⁹

Reports indicate a great disparity in the patterns of power and economic control between men and women.¹²⁰ This is undoubtedly reflected in the level of women's political participation. When women are forced to join parties to obtain financial support and to promote their electoral campaign (as mentioned in 21 interviews), the balance of power enables parties to sustain inequality in the roles, practices, policies, and relationships.

Nonetheless, some female political candidates spoke of their successful experiences despite the lack of funding, by adopting new strategies that rely on electronic platforms and the mass public support of young volunteers during the electoral campaigns (as mentioned in three interviews). This has slightly contributed to changing the traditional electoral balance, allowing some female candidates to make use of a few financial resources and to stand a chance against the power of political money.

115 Interview 23B1, feminist activist, Baghdad, 43 years old, master's degree, president of an organization, 5 October 2021 (Interview 23B1, Baghdad feminist activist).

116 Interview 31BS3, Umm Qasr – Basra candidate.

117 Interview 23B1, Baghdad feminist activist.

118 Raed Hamed, "Map of Political Alliances in the Iraqi Elections (frame)," Anadolu Agency, 10 January 2021, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar>

119 Interview 12N3, Mosul politician.

120 Al Jazeera Media Library, "Controversy over the Use of Political Money in the Iraqi Elections," 10 October 2021, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S1ThD1W04c4>

Political Violence based on discrimination against Women

Yes, I did face violence. They shatter your mental health, your plans, and your ambitions because you are a woman and you cannot enter the world of politics. It's like you are dealing with sharks. You are a woman. Your place is in the house only, and, according to religion, you are not allowed to participate in politics because such matters affect your psychological health. Moreover, women are exploited and regarded as weak. For instance, they make women sign papers specifying the number of protection personnel they can have with them, and their salary is half that of men, even the privileges they enjoy far less than those of men... Many female candidates experienced various forms of violence and fierce defamation, especially in the third round. They recorded videos and dubbed their voices. These women withdrew from the political process due to such acts, not to mention social media posts and disinformation.¹²¹

In general, women in Iraq are exposed to various forms of direct and indirect violence¹²² in public and private spaces.¹²³ The interviews held with female politicians confirmed that they have endured clear patterns of violence, including psychological violence using offensive language towards women, such as mockery and contempt.¹²⁴ Women are also exposed to phishing and the spread of scandals about their personal lives, mostly on social media,¹²⁵ in addition to fabricated pictures and videos and numerous attempts at electronic extortion by hacking personal accounts or threatening to publish pictures and scandals unless women withdraw or pay money.¹²⁶ Moreover, women's campaign posters are torn or mocked, such as by people kissing their photos. These various forms of violence are centred on the idea of using women's bodies and their female organs as a way to bring women down and keep them away from the political field, or to force them to succumb because of the prevailing custom that usually puts the blame on women and gives justifications for men in cases relating to sexual harassment and similar issues:

There are definitely many types and forms of violence that female candidates face, including verbal violence, defamation, and blackmail on social media and in local communities. Women face violence more than men when they participate in elections or in the political field because they fear for their reputation more than men. Society does not tolerate women exposed to rumours or inappropriate language, even if they are entirely fabricated.¹²⁷

Women also face severe restrictions on their movement by their families and local communities due to the prevailing customs. For instance, joining men's meetings, going out at night, traveling, publishing pictures of women on social media, on posters, and on media platforms, or even mentioning a woman's name, among other requirements of political action, all violate the prevailing Iraqi culture that prevents women from participating in public and political field. Several women have been denied the right to work in politics and run for office for these reasons. In previous and current elections, many women were nominated without publishing their personal photos on electoral campaign posters. Some of them published photos of their husbands or the head of the bloc or party. Many female political candidates appear during public meetings accompanied by a family member such as a husband, brother, son, or other relative.

In addition to the psychological violence through mockery, defamation, and blackmail, female candidates have received security threats to their physical safety and their lives, especially in light of the prevailing terrorism and religious extremism

¹²¹ Interview 51NJ11, Najaf candidate.

¹²² Ilham Makki, "Violence against Women in Iraq, What has Changed?", As-Safir, 8 September 2020, available at <https://assafirarabi.com/ar/33173/2020/09/08/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%8C-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%88-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A%D9%84/>

¹²³ Human Rights Watch, "At a Crossroads: Human Rights in Iraq Eight Years after the US-Led Invasion", 21 February 2011, available at <https://www.hrw.org/ar/report/2011/01/21/256170>

¹²⁴ Interview 11N4, Mosul politician.

¹²⁵ Interview 11N5, candidate and politician, Mosul, 51 years old, bachelor's degree, former member of the Nineveh Governorate Council, 13 December 2021.

¹²⁶ Asharq Alawsat, "Iraqi Women Parliamentarians Calling for a Charter against 'Female Defamation'", 25 April 2021, available at <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2937711/%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%C2%AB%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%A9%C2%BB>

¹²⁷ Interview 11N7, Mosul politician.

surrounding the first three electoral rounds (in 2005, 2010, and 2014), especially in the central and western regions of Iraq.¹²⁸ This situation persisted in the elections that followed in 2018 and 2021 in some regions of central and south Iraq, especially after the October Revolution. Many female activists from the October Revolution competed fiercely for parliamentary seats:

During the revolution, the situation was unstable, and I, as a revolutionary woman, could not reveal my identity. Most of the time, we were wearing masks, covering our faces, and moving in secret. Today, after having declared ourselves to everyone as revolutionaries, this is our biggest obstacle, and we have become an easy target. I represent the October Movement, and it is difficult for me to meet with people and go out to hold meetings and such. I believe this was the reason for my loss.¹²⁹

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of international organizations, civil societies, and government authorities to provide special protection for female political candidates, which was offered by the National Security Forces (as mentioned in five interviews), the prevailing social norms and lack of legal awareness led to the perpetuation of blackmail and threats against female candidates.¹³⁰

As prevailing customs link honour to the female body, the treatment of defamation attempts against men versus women are treated very differently. Attempts to defame men are regarded as a minor issue, while the defamation of women, often in the form of sexual accusations, is taken seriously and treated as an incurable mark in politics, requiring no further investigation or discussion, regardless of the validity of the accusations against these women.¹³¹ In such cases, women often withdraw from the political field and are rejected and expelled by their party, not to mention the stigmatization and blame they receive the moment they are subjected to any form of extortion or harassment.¹³²

The violence also affects women's activist movements; as soon as a new one emerges and declares its mission or political visions, speeches inciting violence against its members spread on the basis of social norms demanding that women stay out of the political field. This happened in the October Revolution to feminist activists who joined the sit-ins to advocate for their own political visions. Violence against their bodies was used as a means to suppress the Revolution, under the pretext of protecting the honour of Iraqi women.¹³³

Economic violence is one of the most prominent forms of violence against female candidates. Female politicians confirmed during interviews that many of them were pressured and forced to sign guarantees to give up half of their salaries, or provide other financial guarantees, such as receipts or mortgages, in return for their affiliation with parties and their access to political support and to parliamentary seats. It cannot be forgotten that such obligations were in addition to the often-numerous restrictions already placed on women's financial control and resources by their families and relatives.¹³⁴

128 UNAMI, "Strengthening Women's Political Participation in Iraq: Women Running for Elected Office in Iraq: Needs and Challenges" (UNAMI, "Strengthening Women's Political Participation").

129 Interview 23B3, Baghdad candidate.

130 Interview 22B1, Baghdad candidate; Iraqi News Agency, "Al-Ghazi: A Plan to Support Women's Participation in the Elections and Protect them from Extortion and Social Defamation", 17 June 2021, available at <https://www.ina.iq/128301--html>

131 Lina Imad Al-Musawi, "Iraqi Women's Political Representation and Participation...Vulnerable to Exclusion!", ULTRA Iraq, 16 January 2019, available at <https://ultrairaq.ultrasawt.com/%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%82%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A1/%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9>

132 Alsumaria TV, "Female Parliamentarian Warns of Political Defamation After Being Targeted by Publishing False Family Photos", 11 February 2018, available at <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/229216/%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B0%D8%B1-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%B7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1-%D8%B5>

133 Zahra Ali, "The 2019 Iraq Uprising and the Feminist Imagination", As-Safir, 8 November 2021, available at <https://assafirarabi.com/ar/41600/2021/11/08/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-2019-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%88%D9%8A>, accessed on: 1 November 2022.

134 UNAMI, "Strengthening Women's Political Participation".

Female Activists and Political Parties: Tense Relations

Sixteen feminist activists were asked about their opinion on joining political parties. Thirteen of them agreed that political parties often have agendas different from the agendas, orientations, and interests of feminist activists. Even when a few political entities did manage to come together and adopt a feminist vision, they did not prioritize this vision in their programmes. Therefore, feminist activists avoid joining political parties for fear of the restrictions that a political party could impose on them, as well as the loss of freedom to work and to express their opinions, orientations, and attitudes.

Six activists mentioned that they avoid political parties for fear of the security and social risks associated with such affiliations, as well as the defamation attempts they might be exposed to as a result of their political action. This is also a main reason why families refuse to allow their daughters to participate in politics.

Another reason emphasized by three feminist activists is the low level of acceptance of political parties among the Iraqi people, as they are considered to be the reason for divisions and conflicts between people and for the poor social circumstances in Iraq. This fuels the fear feminist activists have of further stigmatization associated with joining political parties.

The respondents stated that there are many feminist activists who have actually joined political parties, or have been invited to do so and have accepted the invitation, in order to obtain social and financial support, electoral advertisement, and immunity provided to them by political parties in exchange for winning a parliamentary seat. However, these women lose their freedom of opinion and freedom to express their political views. Despite this loss, eleven feminist activists agreed that there can be mutual benefits from joining political parties. Parties often call upon female activists to join their ranks and in return provide these women with financial, security, and social support, as well as advance their efforts towards securing a parliamentary seat. By doing so, the parties take advantage of the popular base and followers that these activists have on social media platforms and the social relations they have built. This also gives the party a humanitarian and civil status associated with their work, allowing it to gain more support.

The feminist activists participating in this paper are certain that joining political parties means giving up their feminist political agendas and working under the orders and directives of political party leaders, which means shifting from one approach to another. Many of them believe that this contractual process is unfair. A female activist may go as far as abandoning her orientations and perhaps her principles in humanitarian work and defending women's rights, in exchange for support and access to the legislative branch. On the other hand, political parties provide these activists with support, using a very small amount of the party's financial resources, not to mention that the party reclaims the money later on in the event that the activist withdraws her membership, through financial guarantees often signed by activists upon joining the party (as mentioned in five interviews).

On the other side of the equation, the political parties believe that female activists demand changes that are or would be rejected by their religious or tribal followers, which influence the ideologies of most parties in Iraq. In the parties' opinions, these activists are adopting the ideology of Western culture when they demand equality and advocate for women's rights, since the parties' ideologies state that women should abide by the restrictions set by the Iraqi political culture.

According to female activists, politicians prioritize their personal interests, including attaining or remaining in positions of power. They believe that political parties have orientations that contradict their own feminist missions, and that any demands related to women's rights, justice or improving women's conditions may threaten these parties' interests or may simply not be considered a priority. Eleven out of 16 interviewed feminist activists further described their relations with political parties as "tense". Feminist activists sometimes attempt to work in their campaigns with politicians, but the latter often refuse to cooperate with them on women's issues. The women believe that this is due to the difference in their orientations and the misalignment of their visions and beliefs.

Several former female politicians will instead choose to work with civil society organizations due to the restrictions imposed on them and their feminist principles in the political field. They claim to find more freedom and more space to work in the field of civil society: "I have more space in civil society organizations and more freedom to express my principles and work towards them. In the political field, there were many restrictions. Political action is restricted by the party's agenda, orientations, and

beliefs. However, in humanitarian work and non-political organisations, I have more space to express my views.”¹³⁵

There is also a clear rivalry and a lack of solidarity between feminists and politicians. It is either one or the other. The prevailing notion in the feminist and political fields is that these two courses of action are always divergent and can almost never come together. This may reflect the clear absence of social equality issues and female voices in decision-making forums in Iraq: “According to political parties, it’s as if the word feminist contradicts their work, or as if a feminist means an opponent they have to deal with cautiously.”¹³⁶

In many cases, the rivalry and hostility go as far as threatening or pressuring independent female activists who are running for elections to withdraw:

*They do not think highly of us in general, and we do not cooperate... Instead of making our work easier, they throw accusations at us because we demand equality! I have come across this more than once, given the tense relations... I had a friend who nominated herself, and the parties were pressuring her to withdraw from the elections in return for certain favours. She had been working in the field of civil society for a long time.*¹³⁷

Most of the time, these withdrawal campaigns are successful; conversely, other activists who join political parties are more able to stay in the race, receive support, and ultimately win votes. However, in exchange, these activists who joined a party are forced to distance themselves from their feminist issues. This confirms the idea that the political parties often control the nomination process and the distribution of votes within each electoral district. Even more disturbingly, many female activists from the October Revolution spoke out against the political process and politicians in Iraq, and were subsequently exposed to assassination, arrest, and defamation, which reveals the extent of the tensions and hostility between civil action and political action.¹³⁸

Activists defending women’s rights often communicate with politicians as part of their advocacy campaigns for the passage or rejection of proposed laws and constitutional amendments. Some political parties hold a series of conferences and sessions in which women’s issues are addressed. They invite female activists for this purpose as well as women from their ranks. However, activists’ interventions are often not taken into account. These conferences are held as a sort of propaganda for the party, adopting generally appealing broad slogans claiming to advocate for women’s rights which subtly reinforce a patriarchally acceptable conception of women’s empowerment (such as distributing humanitarian aid to female heads of households), but no practical measures are taken to change the structures that allow or perpetuate discrimination against women.¹³⁹

Equality or Justice: An Ongoing Debate

The right to equality is stipulated in the Iraqi Constitution, in accordance with international covenants. However, political practices have violated this right through several legislative endeavours related to women’s issues, such as the draft law against domestic violence and the amendment of Article 57 of the Personal Status Law No.188 of 1959; Article 57 pertains to a mother’s right to custody over her children who are under the age of ten, especially in the case where she is divorced or separated from their father. The proposed amendment intended to transfer custody to the father once the child turned seven.¹⁴⁰ In addition, the demands of feminist movements and civil society to amend discriminatory laws against women have been rejected, such

¹³⁵ Interview 12N3, Mosul politician.

¹³⁶ Interview 31BS7, feminist activist, Basra, 46 years old, PhD, 1 November 2021.

¹³⁷ Interview 12K8, feminist activist, Kirkuk, 29 years old, bachelor’s degree, women’s rights activist and government employee, 23 December 2021.

¹³⁸ Manar Al-Zubaidi, “For Safe Participation in the Polls... How the Fears of Iraqi Female Candidates for Early Elections Can Be Dissipated”, Al Jazeera Net, 7 June 2021, available at <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2021/6/7/%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%B7-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%82-%D9%84%D9%87%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B2%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%81>

¹³⁹ Interview 22B2, feminist activist, Baghdad –

Karkh, 30 years old, bachelor’s degree, head of organization and employee in the private sector, 16 October 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Iraqi Forum for Intellectuals and Academics, “Draft Domestic Violence Bill”, available at <https://iraqi-forum2014.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B9-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%8A/>

as for Article 41 of the Iraqi Penal Code of 1969 – granting men the right to “discipline” their wives by beating them – as well as many other discriminatory laws that are unfair to women.¹⁴¹ These include the lax penalties for rape, as well as laws related to divorce terms, obtaining death certificates for husbands who disappeared during war, obtaining identification papers for children, and registering the family name and religion of children born as a result of rape, (especially in the case of genocide and crimes against humanity, such as rape committed by terrorist organizations). Even the Yazidi Survivors Law passed in 2021, which provides financial compensation to survivors of human rights violations and other crimes under international law including rape, does not deal with the issue of children's lineage and religion, since this matter is subject to patriarchal rules.¹⁴² This reveals a continuous violation of, as well as poor understanding of, the principle of equality at various legislative levels:

*In our opinion, the problems that women face are in the public interest. For example, concerning the amendment of Article 57 to withdraw the right of custody from the mother, our party was and still is in support of this amendment. We have held workshops and sessions in this regard and have made recommendations to the competent parliamentary committee.*¹⁴³

There is a clear lack of political will to achieve equality and women's empowerment, despite political speeches and slogans claiming otherwise. There is no adequate budget allocated to supporting women's issues, no unified and comprehensive vision in Iraq for empowering women and achieving equality, and no awareness about the important role of women and social-conscious culture in the political field. In addition, there are no indicators and parameters to monitor and evaluate the work and efforts made to achieve effective women's participation, as stated in the first and second national plans of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda.¹⁴⁴

All political entities, parties and politicians claim to support women and to advocate for equity, but many of their actual practices and agendas undermine the principles of equality and human rights, despite being waved under the banner of equality or justice. As these practices seem to contradict the concept of equality, many of the interviewed politicians resorted to using the term “justice”, which allows them to get away with several forms of discrimination against women. In fact, political entities will often replace the term “equality” with “justice,” which is defined as “granting everyone the rights they deserve”. In so doing, denying women many of their rights can be normalized under the pretext of “justice”. Religious and tribal beliefs are also consistently used as a basis for framing the concepts of equality and justice in accordance with the ideology of the political entity:

*“Justice is what matters. Equality is a term used by the West to undermine Islamic values.”*¹⁴⁵

*“Within the boundaries of the Islamic religion, women have equality, rights, and duties. There is no discrimination against them.”*¹⁴⁶

*“The most important step we have taken in the movement is to abandon calls for equality in favour of social justice. Today, I am not for equality between men and women; rather, I want to achieve social justice for women. Therefore, the Imtidad Movement has adopted the issue of domestic violence, women and children, as well as child protection. We have many projects and electoral programmes in this regard.”*¹⁴⁷

*“I tend towards achieving social justice and equality in education, profession and political practice for women.”*¹⁴⁸

*“I am a woman who tends to adopt the notion of social justice and equality only when it comes to career appointments and compensation.”*¹⁴⁹

141 Penal Code No. 111 of 1969, available at <http://wiki.dorar-aliraq.net/iraqilaws/law/20706.html>; Anfal Abed, “Violence against Women Between Practice and Legislation in Iraq”, 2020, available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/07/20/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B9/>

142 Yazidi Survivors Law, available at <https://www.moj.gov.iq/upload/pdf/4621.pdf>

143 Interview 22B6, Baghdad politician.

144 National Action Plan for the Implementation of the UNSCR 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security 2014-2018, available at <https://www.efi-ife.org/sites/default/files/NAP%201325%20Arb%20-%2026%20Nov%2013%20Final.pdf>. Second National Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, available at <http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Iraq-NAP3.pdf>

145 Interview 51NJ14, politician, Najaf, 41 years old, bachelor's degree, professor at the Islamic Seminary (Hawza), 18 December 2021.

146 Interview 31BS3, Umm Qasr – Basra candidate.

147 Interview 23B3, Baghdad candidate.

148 Interview 22B1, Baghdad candidate.

149 Interview 23B5, Baghdad candidate.

“All parties talk about equality... especially parties in power that have a large parliamentary bloc and have influence over political decisions... So why have they yet to issue a law on the matter!? The reason is because they do not believe in their own statements, and some women also do not believe in fighting violence against women.”¹⁵⁰

There are clear contradictions in the political parties' concept of equality, and an ongoing controversy over which terminology best reflects the thoughts and practices of political entities. This indicates a lack of commitment to adopting the constitutional and international approach to equality – which represents one of the pillars of democracy and development – and continuing to use religious or tribal interpretations as pretexts for discrimination against women.

Political parties in Iraq range from claiming to recognize and adopt the approach of equality – especially in political discourse in an attempt to legitimize their work and give it a humanitarian gloss – to those explicitly rejecting this notion and considering it inconsistent with their religious and tribal beliefs. Many politicians interviewed for the purposes of this paper confirmed that they reject the principle of equality, believing that social differences should dictate behaviour, opportunities, and attitudes towards others: “The issue of equality is a crime committed by women against themselves...”¹⁵¹ Nonetheless, many political parties hold conferences that advocate for women's issues in order to promote the perception of the party's commitment to principles of democracy, humanitarian approaches, and the principle of equality (as mentioned in four interviews). The resulting recommendations are rarely applied.

Equality between Political and Civil Action

Activists believe that female politicians should push forward feminist issues and make the voices of women heard, as they represent them at the political level. However, they are often pessimistic due to the lack of progress on women's issues at the legislative, executive, and judicial levels. In their speeches, female politicians show interest in women's issues, but there seem to be limits to their vision regarding equality, as well as restrictions to their work in this field. Female politicians also mentioned that any step taken towards solving women's issues requires the approval of the leaders of the parties they belong to and their subsequent allocation of funds.¹⁵² Some female politicians expressed their support for the Domestic Violence Law (mentioned in five interviews), while others believe that helping women establish small enterprises and obtain loans and social pensions contributes to achieving equality (mentioned in three interviews). Some also mentioned efforts aimed at helping women reach the most senior positions (mentioned in three interviews).

On the other hand, some female politicians, especially former politicians, mentioned that passing the Domestic Violence Law would lead to “the destruction of families” and that facilitating polygyny is in the interest of women (mentioned in two interviews), while educating women about their rights leads to their rebellion (mentioned in two interviews). Politicians continue to link their approach to equality to their religious beliefs. Female politicians mostly interpreted equality and women's issues in accordance with the ideology adopted by their parties.

¹⁵⁰ Interview 12K7, Kirkuk politician.

¹⁵¹ Interview 51NJ13, candidate, Najaf, 42 years old, PhD, 12 December 2021.

¹⁵² Interview 12K7, Kirkuk politician.

About the Partner

Iraqi Al-Amal Association

Iraqi Al-Amal Association is a non-political, non-sectarian association of volunteers actively engaged in projects for the benefit and well being of the Iraqi population regardless of race, gender and political or religious affiliation. Al-Amal was established in 1992 in the midst of the horrific conditions prevailing after the Second Gulf War with the aim of providing aid to relieve the suffering of the Iraqi people. Al-Amal started its work in Iraqi Kurdistan where many programmes and projects were executed.

About the SAWT project

The SAWT project seeks to quantitatively and qualitatively increase women's meaningful inclusion in political and peace processes in the MENA region in order to increase their ability to influence outcomes and establish post-conflict gender-egalitarian frameworks through supporting women's integration in all phases of the peacebuilding process. Taking a broader and more holistic view of what "peace processes" mean and look like and focusing on the emergence of a new generation of women activists in MENA, the project proposes four broad areas of work and will involve collaboration with civil society actors, academics, activists, and networks in both Europe and the MENA region.



contact@arab-reform.net
Paris - Beirut - Tunis