

GENDERED POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT IN IRAQ: EXAMINING WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT IN THE POST-2003 POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

The present article examines women's political engagement in Iraq following 2003, presenting an evaluation of their current political milieu. The text provides insight into the rise of multiple women's groups, clarifying their goals and actions. The article delves into the unique difficulties and hindrances faced by proponents of women's rights in present-day Iraq. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Ba'athist government, a promising window of opportunity emerged for women to participate in the political sphere. As a result, female citizens of Iraq have attained a noteworthy degree of political engagement, obtaining roles within the governmental and parliamentary spheres. Despite persistent efforts, individuals in Iraq are still facing a range of obstacles stemming from tribal, sectarian, customary, and legal factors, which are primarily influenced by prevailing patriarchal and sectarian ideologies. This research employs historical, descriptive, and political analysis to showcase the active participation of Iraqi women in the political and social landscape of Iraq. This statement highlights their continuous involvement in promoting the progress of the political system, as evidenced by their occupancy of various political positions.

Keywords: Iraqi women, participation, political process, the Iraqi government, Iraqi parliament, challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The status of women in Iraq has experienced fluctuations throughout history, with women actively participating in various spheres of life. Women constitute approximately 50% of the voters, so political parties cannot overlook their concerns and demands.¹ To promote equal rights and opportunities for women, the Iraq Parliament has engaged in legislation dedicated to women's empowerment. Several laws have been passed, such as reserving 25%

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¹ Al Jazeera Net. (2022). The population of Iraq exceeds 41 million people 51% males compared to 49% females. <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2022/1/4/51-%D8%B0%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1>

of seats in the Iraqi Parliament and local councils for women.² Women from diverse backgrounds, including Arab, Kurdish, and minority ethnic and religious women, have fearlessly and fervently joined the fight for freedom.

While the government expresses concern about gender equality, women have primarily been granted decision-making rights. Organizations dedicated to women's rights play a vital role in raising awareness about women's rights and freedoms. However, it is essential to note that some of these organizations are influenced by the agendas of political parties, whether secular or Islamic. The Iraqi Government has also ensured equal educational opportunities for both sexes in all educational institutions, including universities. Generally, men and women in Iraq enjoy somewhat equal rights and responsibilities. Despite the government's efforts to facilitate women's political participation, barriers impede their effective and widespread engagement. These barriers include sectarian and tribal customs, religious beliefs, and economic and educational challenges. This study examines the participation of Iraqi women in the political process and highlights their influential position within Iraqi society. In addition to fulfilling their roles as housewives, they actively participate in political and social life. Under previous Iraqi governments, Iraqi women's activities were suppressed and prohibited, especially in Kurdish society, which was striving for liberation. However, since the establishment of the Iraqi Republic in 1958, women have enjoyed the freedom to work, leading to increased involvement in political life and participation in the political process. Women also gained the right to vote and run for the Iraqi national council despite facing numerous obstacles during and before the Baathist regime.

Following the events of 2003, the activation of civil society institutions and organizations within the framework of the political process became crucial for democratic development in Iraq. The political participation of Iraqi women serves as evidence of the awareness and progress of Iraqi society. It reflects a civilized and political phenomenon that arises when a society reaches a certain level of sophistication.³ However, in recent years, most women's organizations in Iraq have experienced challenges due to the nature of the political system. Many have lost their independence and become affiliated with political parties, serving as occasional organizations used by the political system to gain support. Consequently, the legal gains achieved by women in Iraq were not the result of a mature civil society or political system but were imposed through international commitments.⁴

This study holds significance in shedding light on the role of Iraqi women's organizations in addressing women's issues and their commitment to raising awareness

² Mehmet Efendi Oglu. The history of the political participation of Iraqi women and the current reality. (12/05/2018). From <https://www.noonpost.com/content/23272>

³ Imran, A., J. Civil Society, and the Political Process in Iraq. *Journal of Political Science*.V, 34: 171. (2012).

⁴ Imran, A., J:171.

among women and society. These organizations aim to enhance cultural, political, and social awareness on various issues by fostering interaction between women and the state. Moreover, they seek to establish an independent political space that enables women to make political decisions freely. The experience of women's civil work and institutions in Iraq has yet to meet women's aspirations and needs, and a clear political direction for women remains elusive. The challenges stem from the newness of the democratic experience and the unstable nature of Iraq's political, security, and economic situation. Consequently, this study aims to address the following questions to provide further insights.

Firstly, this study investigates how the Iraqi government has affected women's organizations in terms of political engagement, the difficulties these organizations face, and their impact on political engagement. Here are some presumptions that address the research hypothesis: First off, civil society will be more effective and proactive in promoting women's political participation the more independent and socially and legally aware women's organizations and institutions are. Second, Iraqi women's groups have contributed somewhat to raising women's political awareness.

The study uses historical, descriptive, and political analysis techniques to gather pertinent data. It uses data from books and scholarly publications to explain how Iraqi women participate in politics. The study highlights the significance of Iraqi women's political participation and offers an overview of the reality of women's organizations in Iraq. The relationship between women's organizations and the government is also further explored, and it is determined how these organizations have influenced Iraqi women's access to political participation and leadership roles. It is significant to note that, even though laws and legislation offer opportunities for participation, Iraqi women have not fully reaped the rewards of these chances as they ought to. This supports the idea that support and help are required to enable women to take advantage of these present opportunities.

The study explores the complex dynamics surrounding women's organizations, the role of the government, and the overall effect on women's political participation in Iraq by exploring these aspects.⁵

LITERATURE REVIEW

The historiography of the women's movement in Iraq before 1958 has been scantily addressed in contemporary academic literature written in English. Scholars frequently disregard this period as a precursor to a more comprehensive analysis of women's challenges and structured endeavors during the Baath regime. Upon closer examination, the concise

⁵ [Mishkat Al Moumin](#). Constitutional and Legal Rights of Iraqi Women. April 1, 2008. From [Constitutional and Legal Rights of Iraqi Women | Middle East Institute \(mei.edu\)](#).

explanations provided by secondary sources seem ambiguous and contradictory. Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that two distinct historiographical approaches exist. The initial approach revolves around the factions and advocates affiliated with the Iraqi Women's Union, founded in 1945. The literary work by Doreen Ingrams, titled "The Awakened: Women in Iraq" (1983), is a remarkable illustration of the approach as mentioned earlier. In contrast, the second approach centers on the advancements and associations affiliated with the League for the Protection of Women's Rights, established in 1952. The perspective on women in Iraq is most effectively presented in Deborah Cobbett's 1989 paper titled "Women in Iraq." The history of the women's movement in pre-1958 Iraq was subject to conflicting narratives, as presented by the Iraqi Women's Union and the League for the Defence of Women's Rights. Regrettably, the Iraqi women's movement suffers from a lack of historical sources.

It is noteworthy that the works of Nazihadlimi⁶ and Sabiha Dawooda⁷, who were prominent female activists in Iraq during the Maliki era until the Ba'ath regime's collapse in 2003, do not make any reference to the challenges faced by religious women's organizations that were active during that time, such as those representing the Jewish and Christian communities.

Subsequent scholars have opted to depend on one of the two narratives, leading to inadequate comprehension of the topic. The objective of this scholarly article is to analyze and break down the two separate accounts that were initially put forth by advocates and to develop a more intricate portrayal of the progression of the women's movement in Iraq, spanning from the early 1900s to the conclusion of the Hashemite period. To understand the origins of these discrepant reports, it is necessary to revisit 1945, during which various women's groups joined forces to establish the Iraqi Women's Union, a coalition to advance and organise their endeavours. The union's objective was to augment women's efforts in enhancing their social, civic, economic, health, and legal status through the promotion of cooperation among diverse women's organizations in Iraq. The organization encouraged its constituent communities to surpass sectarian, racial, and religious partitions. At the outset, it exhibited a significant acceptance towards political variances.⁸

It is noteworthy that the portrayal of the historical role of Iraqi women by Orientalists and researchers has failed to recognize the cultural elements that have facilitated Kurdish women's notable political engagement. Additionally, the authors have

⁶ Naziha Dulaimi encouraged Iraqi women to work for the establishment of the Iraqi Republic. During the Iraqi Republic, she established the Iraqi Women's Union, and providing schools for women was a great struggle.

⁷ Sabiha al-Shaykh Da'ud (1912-1975) is recognized as the author of an extensive book on the women's movement during the Hashemite period. She served as a member of the directorate for two constituent organizations of the Iraqi Women's Union starting in the 1940s, eventually attaining the position of vice president in the early 1950s.

⁸ Sabiha al-Shaykh Da'ud, *Awwal al-Tariq Ha al-Nahda al-Niswiyya fi al-Hraq* (Baghdad: al-Rabita, 1958), 175; *al-Hawadith*, 18 June 1946. 2.

been unable to acknowledge the sectarian and tribal barriers that impeded the increased involvement of Iraqi women in the political sphere.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the early 20th century, the British occupation of Iraq, which was facilitated through the monarchy, incited resistance among a cohort of women, particularly those from the middle class, who aimed to contest their oppressive circumstances. In 1923, the Women's Renaissance Club was founded and spearheaded by prominent individuals, including Asmaa Al-Zahawi, Naima Al-Saeed, Mary Abdel-Masih, and Fakhriya Al-Askari. In 1930, women commenced advocating for their rights in a public manner, encompassing matters about the removal, lifting, and wearing of veils. During 1930, the second women's conference took place in Damascus, during which Miss Amina Al-Rahal was nominated, as reported by Savannah Knight in 2015.⁹

Mrs. Hapsa Khan Al-Hafeed established a women's committee in Sulaymaniyah to provide aid to the underprivileged. This committee subsequently evolved into the Kurdish Women's Association. Following this, the associations and forums underwent a transformation whereby they became instrumental in connecting women's movements with the political endeavour to achieve national goals and the removal of British colonial rule.¹⁰

The involvement and discourse of the Iraqi delegation at the conference yielded a noteworthy influence. Subsequently, attention was redirected towards benevolent volunteerism, culminating in the formation of institutions such as the Red Crescent Society and the Children's Protection Society. The Women's Committee to Combat, the initial women's organization, was established in 1946. Afifa Raouf founded the Iraqi Women's League in 1952, which is considered to be among the most impactful women's movements. The entity in question attained eminence as a result of its objectives, extensive outreach, and substantial constituency.^{11, 12} The league's objectives were centered around promoting peace, advocating for national liberation and democracy, championing women's rights and equality, and safeguarding the welfare of children. In 1953, the organization was granted membership in the International Democratic Women's Union and subsequently hosted its inaugural public conference in 1959. After the coup of 1963, the aforementioned association was disbanded, resulting in the apprehension and prosecution of numerous

⁹ Savannah, K. *Historical Overview of the Struggle of Iraqi Women*. 2015. From <https://www.c-we.org/ar/show.art.asp?aid=458874>.

¹⁰ Ziyab, F. Al-Taie. The development of the Iraqi women's movement - quick features. *The Civilized Dialogue* - Issue: 5863. (May 3, 2018). <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=597708>

¹¹ Efrati, Noga. "The other'awakening'in Iraq: The women's movement in the first half of the twentieth century." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 31, no. 2: 153-73. 2004

¹² Kamp, M. *Organizing Ideologies of Gender, Class, and Ethnicity: The Pre-Revolutionary Women's Movement in Iraq*. (2003). In *Women and Gender in the Middle East and Islamic World Today*, edited by S. Zuhur. Berkeley: The University of California Press.

individuals affiliated with the organization. The league made an application to the Ministry of the Interior in 1969, seeking permission to recommence its operations; however, their request was denied. Notwithstanding this obstacle, women's organizations persisted with their resolute and vigorous involvement in feminist communities using attending conferences, taking part in events, and deciding on international conferences in Berlin, Copenhagen, and other locations.^{13, 14}

The association movement in Iraq is undergoing a process of development and advancement, rendering aid and succour to women belonging to diverse religious and ethnic groups. The tangible evidence of their commitment to achieving gender equality and ensuring the well-being of children is demonstrated through their efforts to aid women who have been raped and captives, including Yazidi women and Christians. Throughout history, Iraqi women and girls have been granted a relatively higher degree of rights in comparison to their counterparts in various regions of the Middle East. Notwithstanding the existence of monarchies, women were still perceived as inferior members of society.^{15, 16}

The Iraqi Provisional Constitution of 1970 conferred parity of rights to women, and subsequent legal measures ensured their entitlement to suffrage, educational opportunities, political candidature, and property ownership. After the Gulf War of 1991, there was a discernible gender disparity in the adverse economic effects of the United Nations sanctions, with women and girls experiencing significant obstacles in obtaining essential resources such as food, healthcare, and education. The government imposed additional restrictions on the women's movement by exclusively permitting the operation of groups that concentrated on philanthropic and societal assistance.¹⁷

Under the regime of Saddam Hussein, the expression of Iraqi women and men was suppressed by force and coercion. The Iraqi Penal Code, which was put into effect in 1990, included Article 111, which provided legal immunity to male perpetrators of "honour killings" against their female kin. According to estimations, over four thousand women have been subjected to egregious offences.¹⁸ Regularly, the Iraqi government subjected female dissidents and the families of oppositionists and defectors to torture and execution. As an illustration, Safiyah Hassan, a mother who publicly condemned the Iraqi government for the homicide of her offspring, was subsequently subjected to fatal violence.¹⁹ Female

¹³ Efrati, Noga. "Negotiating Rights in Iraq: Women and the Personal Status Law." *The Middle East Journal* 59 (4): 577–95. August 2005.

¹⁴ Al-Ali and Pratt : 29

¹⁵ Efrati, Noga: 577–95.

¹⁶ Kamp, M. Organizing Ideologies of Gender, Class, and Ethnicity: The Pre-Revolutionary Women's Movement in Iraq." (2003).

¹⁷ Al-Ali, Nadjie. "The Iraqi women's movement: Past and contemporary perspectives." *Mapping Arab Women's Movements: A Century of Transformations from Within* (2012): 105-121.

¹⁸ United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women January 2002. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/459009>

¹⁹ U.S. State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2001, March 2002; U.S. State Department, Iraq: A Population Silenced, December 2002

detainees who were incarcerated in Saddam's prisons reportedly suffered severe physical abuse, including beatings, electric shocks, branding, and systematic rape. The experiences of Iraqi women in confronting oppressive regimes underscore the pressing necessity for gender parity, safeguarding women's entitlements, and striving towards a fair and equitable society.

STRUGGLES AND MILESTONES: EVOLUTION OF WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS IN IRAQ

Women's Organizations during the Monarchy Era

The emergence of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Iraq can be attributed to the monarchy era, marked by the enactment of the Royal Constitution of 1925. This constitutional document guaranteed the liberty of speech and the establishment of political parties, labour unions, and associations without limitations.²⁰ During this period, the monarchy provided support to CSOs that prioritized social welfare activities and exhibited moderate political objectives. The NCCI has identified various organizations that were established during different periods in Iraq, such as the Women's Revival Club (1923), the Iraqi Red Society (IRCS) (1932), the Al-Bayt Schooling Association (1950), and the Women's Rights League (1952). These organizations were actively engaged in advocating for the marginalised, democratic principles, education, and social unity.²¹ The Women's Renaissance Club, which came into existence in 1924, is a noteworthy development in the progression of the feminist movement. In the ensuing years, additional entities were founded to tackle societal concerns. In 1933, the Red Crescent Society established a branch dedicated to women, and subsequently, in 1935, the Nation's Homes Association and the Society for Combating Social Ills were founded. The year 1945 witnessed the formation of the Iraqi Women's Union, a coalition comprising women's groups to enhance women's empowerment and ameliorate their social, civic, economic, health, and legal status.²² The union was comprised of five discrete societies, namely the Red Crescent Society, the Child Protection Society, the Houses of the People Society, the Women's Temperance and Social Welfare Society, and the Women's League Society. Notwithstanding their divergent political ideologies, the individuals comprising these factions discovered a shared foundation in their first-hand encounters as the inaugural cohort to observe evolving attitudes towards women within their society and to reap the rewards of novel prospects in academia, vocation, and civic engagement. The curtailment of groups that were exclusively

²⁰ Yehuda Halper. Civility, freedom, and Iraq's constitution of 1925. America's Future. (September 7, 2003). From, <https://americasfuture.org/civility-freedom-and-iraqs-constitution-of-1925/>

²¹ NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq. Iraq's civil society in perspective. (2011). Relief Web. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Full_Report_476.pdf

²² Afrah, S. Abdel Hassan. Women's associations and clubs in the Republican era (June 1, 2013). retrieved from <https://algardenia.com/2014-04-04-19-52-20/menouats/4562-2013-05-23-22-29-14.html>.

devoted to charitable and social services by the government constituted a setback for the women's movement, as noted by Efrati in 2008.²³

Notwithstanding the difficulties, the Iraqi Women's Union persevered in its activities within the socio-economic and political context, receiving backing from the government and the monarchy. The League for the Defence of Women's Rights was established in 1952 by women who identified as both Communist and non-Communist.²⁴ This initiative was taken after their unsuccessful efforts to revive the Women's League Society, which had been prohibited. The information cited in this study is based on Batatu's (1978) work.²⁵ The Iraqi women's movement was instigated by male intellectuals, including prominent figures such as Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi (1863–1936) and MaVuf al-Rusafi (1875–1945), who played a noteworthy part in its development. Al-Zahawi was a proponent of women's education and actively opposed cultural practices that included veiling, seclusion, polygamy, male-biased divorce rights, forced marriage, marriage without prior acquaintance, and significant age disparities between spouses.²⁶ According to Efrati's (2008) account, the individual in question espoused the view that the advancement of a nation was inextricably linked to the condition of its female population. This individual emphasised that a country could not make progress if a significant proportion of its populace was impeded by illiteracy and other obstacles. It is noteworthy that the Iraqi Women's Union and other organizations associated with the Iraqi Communist Party encountered limitations during the timeframe.²⁷

Women's Organizations Advancing Gender Equality during General Qassim's Era

The post-14 July 1958 revolution era witnessed a significant and heightened involvement of women, particularly among female students, who exhibited a stronger and more self-aware participation. The proliferation of parties and movements that tackled the issue of women as part of a larger problem was a result of the influx of novel ideas from various organizations.²⁸ Following the revolution, a significant number of these associations persisted in their operations, alongside the emergence of additional associations, particularly after the enactment of Associations Law No. 1 in 1960. The Associations Law No. 63 of 1955 has been deemed problematic due to the broad powers it grants to the executive authority of the Ministry of Interior and the Council of Ministers.²⁹ The law allows for the authorization, supervision, and dissolution of political parties while also

²³ Efrati, Noga: 577-95.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Batatu, Hanna. The old social classes and the revolutionary movements of Iraq. Vol. 13. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978.

²⁶ Ibrahim, Kh. Al-Allaf. Iraqi Women and their Role in Building Contemporary Iraq 1921-2003. Women's News Agency (November 12, 2011).

²⁷ Efrati, Noga: 577-95

²⁸ Afrah, S. Abdel Hassan. Women's associations and clubs in the Republican era (June 1, 2013). retrieved from <https://algardenia.com/2014-04-04-19-52-20/menouats/4562-2013-05-23-22-29-14.html>.

²⁹ Ibid

restricting the right of Iraqi citizens to join parties without a valid reason. These provisions have been criticised for contradicting democratic principles of political organization. The Iraqi Women's League was a nascent women's association with strong ties to the Iraqi Communist Party. The organization, originally referred to as the League for the Defence of Women's Rights, underwent a name modification and was subsequently recognised as the Iraqi Women's League. In the absence of official sanction from the government, factions led by communist ideology were compelled to function covertly and were frequently subjected to oppression³⁰. One of the founders of the League, Dr. Naziha al-Dulaymi, inspired numerous young women to participate in advocating for the advancement of women's legal rights. Her contribution as a medical practitioner was noteworthy, as she played a crucial role in improving the overall public health situation in Iraq. The family law that was approved by the revolutionary dictatorship of 'Abd al-Karim Qasim in 1959 was one of the most progressive in the region. This was in response to the demands made by women for greater legal rights and equality.³¹

The progressive interpretation of the Personal Status Code of 1959 led to substantial revisions of preceding legislation. The legal framework was amended to provide women with equal inheritance rights, while stringent measures were implemented to prohibit polygamy and unilateral divorce. Additionally, women were required to provide their consent for marriage, and the right to marry, including the bride price, was underscored.^{32, 33} The regional policies of Qasim, the leader of Iraq, caused discontent among Arab nationalist groups within the country, notably the growing Ba'th Party. This resulted in Iraq's estrangement from neighbouring nations. The coup carried out by Ba'thists and Arab nationalist officers in 1963 failed to elicit significant support from the general population.³⁴ Notwithstanding this setback, the Ba'th Party managed to regroup and initiate a subsequent, triumphant revolution in 1968, inaugurating thirty-five years of Ba'thist governance.^{35, 36} In 1958, Abdul Karim Qasim assumed power and facilitated the involvement of women in the political sphere. The individual in question provided backing for the Iraqi Women's General Organization and designated Dr. Niziha Dulemi as a member of his cabinet.³⁷ The individual in question expressed opposition towards women's organizations affiliated with other nationalities, deeming them to be chauvinistic and

³⁰ Al, Ali: 105-121.

³¹ Al-Ali, Nadjé. *Iraqi women: Untold Stories from 1948 to the Present*. London and New York: 2007. Zed Books

³² Efrati, Noga: 577-95

³³ Al-Ali and Pratt: 126.

³⁴ Tripp C. The Ba'th and the rule of Saddam Husain 1968-2003. In: *A History of Iraq*. Cambridge University Press; 2007:186-276.

³⁵ Farouk-Sluglett, Marion, and Peter Sluglett. *Iraq since 1958: From revolution to dictatorship*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001.

³⁶ Tripp C. *Ibid*.

³⁷ In 1959, during Abdul Karim Qasim's leadership, al-Dulaymi was appointed the minister of municipalities, becoming the first female cabinet member in the Arab world.

regressive. One such organization that was established in 1952 with the backing of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Kurdistan Women's Union, was included in this category.³⁸

Women's Organizations under the Baathist Regime

The Ba'ath party enacted the 1970 Iraqi Provisional Constitution, which laid the legal groundwork for women's equality in Iraq. The 19th article of the constitution explicitly affirms the equality of all citizens before the law, regardless of their gender, lineage, linguistic affiliation, socioeconomic status, or religious beliefs. Furthermore, Iraq demonstrated its dedication to gender equality by signing the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICECR) in 1971. After the Gulf War of 1991, the condition of women in Iraq experienced a marked decline. According to Human Rights (2003), the economic consequences of the sanctions imposed by the United Nations had a disproportionate impact on women and girls, leading to restricted availability of essential resources such as food, healthcare, and education.³⁹ In 1968, the Ba'ath party, which was a secular political organization, implemented an extensive plan to strengthen its governance and attain swift economic growth, despite encountering a deficiency in human resources.⁴⁰ The Iraqi government implemented legislative measures to enhance the position of women in both the public and private domains. During the pre-1990s era, women in Iraq were significantly involved in the nation's political and economic development. The Ba'ath Party, in contrast, disbanded several civil society groups and instituted the Iraqi Women's General Federation (GFIW) as a substitute.⁴¹ The findings, the GFIW played a crucial role in the execution of state policies by facilitating job training, education, and other social services for women. Additionally, the organization served as a medium for the dissemination of official propaganda.⁴² Despite this, certain Iraqi women contended that the GFIW had a detrimental effect on women's issues and did not accurately depict or advocate for the hardships faced by numerous subjugated Iraqi women.⁴³

Legislation was enacted by the Iraqi government in 1978 to mandate compulsory attendance for both genders in elementary school. The primary objective of this legislation was to eliminate illiteracy and promote equal opportunities in the public service sector.

³⁸ Al-Ali, Nadjie. "The Iraqi women's movement: Past and contemporary perspectives." Mapping Arab Women's Movements: A Century of Transformations from Within (2012): 105-121.

³⁹ Human Rights Watch. Briefing Paper Background on Women's Status in Iraq Before the Fall of the Saddam Hussein Government (November 2003). at: <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/wrd/iraqi-women.htm>.

⁴⁰ Joseph, Suad. "Elite strategies for state-building: Women, family, religion and state in Iraq and Lebanon." In Women, Islam, and the state: 176-200. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1991.

⁴¹ Rassam, Amal. "Political ideology and women in Iraq: legislation and cultural constraints." In Women and development in the Middle East and North Africa, pp. 82-95. Brill, 1992.

⁴² Rassam: 87

⁴³ Joseph: 182-183.

According to Rassam, the legislation had a discernible effect on the percentage of women who were employed in the workforce.⁴⁴ Amidst the Iran-Iraq conflict, the limited availability of able-bodied men resulted in an increased participation of women in the labour force and public sector. According to the Iraqi Bureau of Statistics report in 1978, the representation of women in various professions was as follows: 38.5% in teaching, 31% in medicine, 25% in laboratory technology, 15% in accounting, and 15% in government positions.⁴⁵ Furthermore, it is noteworthy that in the year 1980, women were granted the privilege to exercise their right to vote and participate in political campaigns. Moreover, in 1986, Iraq officially endorsed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), thus becoming one of the pioneering countries to do so. Notwithstanding certain reservations made to specific paragraphs of the treaty, such as 2(f), 2(g), 9, and 16, it can be argued that the fundamental principles of equality were compromised (Rassam.).⁴⁶ Under the governance of the Ba'ath Party, a prospect arose to endorse the involvement of women in the governmental and administrative sectors. The Ba'ath Party prioritised its women's organizations while prohibiting all other women's activities and resorting to stringent actions against women activists, such as executions, imprisonments, or forced exiles.⁴⁷

Following the conclusion of the Gulf War in 1991, a confluence of legal, economic, and political factors resulted in the regression of the gains that had been made towards improving the status of women and girls within Iraqi society. A significant political factor involved the strategic employment of Islamic and tribal customs by Saddam Hussein as a means of exerting political influence. Furthermore, the sanctions imposed by the United Nations in the aftermath of the war had an unequal effect on women, specifically women and children. The national literacy campaign in Iraq demonstrated initial advancement, as evidenced by the literacy rate of around 75% among Iraqi women in 1987. However, by the end of 2000, Iraq had the most deficient adult literacy rates in the region. The female population encountered heightened restrictions on their mobility and legal entitlements, consequent to the promulgation of governmental edicts and the enactment of laws that hurt their legal standing. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women made a startling revelation in 2001, indicating that in Iraq approximately 4,000 women and children had been subjected to "honour killings" after the implementation of Saddam reforms in 1991.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Rassam:91

⁴⁵ Republic of Iraq - Ministry of Planning, Central Statistical Organization Iraqi Bureau of Statistics report (1978). <https://mop.gov.iq/en/central-statistical-organization>

⁴⁶ Rassam:92

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibrahim Al-Marashi. Iraqi women still live the legacy of gender-based violence. March 8, 2023. From <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/iraqi-women-still-live-legacy-gender-based-violence>

IRAQI WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS IN THE POST-2003 ERA

Since 2003, the activation of civil society institutions and organizations in Iraq has been deemed a vital constitutional entitlement. The advocacy for gender equality and the challenge of societal structures, commonly known as feminism, has had a noteworthy impact on Iraq since 2003.⁴⁹ Following the collapse of the preceding governmental regime, female individuals assumed a prominent role in endeavours to enhance the quality of life and mitigate the humanitarian predicament. The women in question originated from a variety of ethnic and religious groups and were mostly situated in urban areas with middle-class socioeconomic status. The initiatives were significantly influenced by the Iraqi Women's Network, which is comprised of more than eighty women's groups at the grassroots level throughout the nation. In the aftermath of the invasion, a multitude of grassroots women's initiatives and organizations surfaced, with a primary emphasis on pragmatic concerns about destitution, substandard healthcare, housing, and social welfare. Iraqi women collaborated to advance education and training opportunities for females, deliver healthcare services, and extend humanitarian assistance by consolidating their resources. Additionally, they participated in political mobilisation efforts, promoting the implementation of a gender-based quota system in political spheres to guarantee equitable political representation. The activists engaged in a campaign to oppose efforts aimed at substituting the Personal Status Law. Additionally, they advocated for the inclusion of a women's quota in elected representatives across different tiers of government and lobbied for a gender quota to be incorporated in the new constitution. During this period, the tenacity, perseverance, and productive endeavours of a variety of female activists and organizations were a source of motivation.

The Iraqi parliamentary elections have revealed a noticeable increase in women's representation, with close to 100 seats secured by female candidates. Nevertheless, the occurrence of women occupying positions of sovereignty and taking up ministerial roles is exceedingly uncommon. The United Nations expressed apprehension in 2018 regarding the inadequate representation of women in authoritative roles in Iraq. This was attributed to the prevalence of a regressive mindset and masculine tendencies within the existing political factions. The insufficient cognizance of gender concerns has made women's representation predominantly emblematic, lacking significant political participation. Since October 2019, Iraqi women and girls have actively protested, advocating for gender equality, and challenging the prevailing social, political, and economic conditions that sustain patriarchal violence. They eschew conventional gender norms and derive inspiration from the

⁴⁹ Imran, A, J: 171.

extensive legacy of Iraqi women's rights groups.⁵⁰ Despite efforts to enact legal reforms, progress has been sluggish, and Iraq's adherence to the CEDAW remains deficient. Women and girls who have experienced gender-based violence encounter various obstacles in their pursuit of justice.

The Iraqi Women's Movement has transformed, with notable figures such as Hanaa Edwar assuming pivotal roles in promoting and advancing the cause of women's rights. The endeavour to establish a 40% quota for women in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) encountered internal deliberations and resistance from individuals such as Paul Bremer. Ultimately, a consensus was reached to establish a quota of 25% for female representation in elected assemblies.⁵¹ Nevertheless, a divergence of opinions emerged between proponents of women's rights who held more secular perspectives and those associated with Islamist factions or organizations. Numerous activists advocating for women's rights sought to create a separation between themselves and the Green Zone while also attempting to limit their interactions with occupying military forces. The Iraqi women's movement encountered substantial impediments due to the surge in violence and disregard for the law, as armed groups resorted to intimidating and perpetrating fatal attacks against female activists. The incidence of violence disproportionately impacted women, even though men constituted many victims.

In Iraq, the female population comprises nearly half of the total population. However, the governmental transition that occurred in 2003, coupled with the ensuing violence, has amplified the susceptibility of Iraqi women and girls. The presence of insecurity impedes the persistence of gender inequality, while the perpetuation of violence against women, specifically in the form of domestic abuse, endures. Following 2003, female organizations and civil society leaders were frequently subjected to intimidation and violence, which hindered their nonviolent activities and advocacy for their rights, thereby suppressing their voices. Even though women have taken up leadership roles in civil society organizations both locally and nationally, their involvement in political activities and contribution to national reconciliation endeavours continue to be constrained. The perpetuation of violence and the reinforcement of women's second-class status are threatened by legislative restrictions that devalue women in comparison to men.

Article 41 of the Iraqi Penal Code No. 1 is a prominent piece of discriminatory legislation in Iraq that sanctions spousal violence against women under the pretext of lawful entitlements. The legislation, which was put into effect in 1969, persisted despite the alteration of the political framework in 2003. The absence of legal safeguards for females who encounter gender-oriented violence enables offenders to act without fear of

⁵⁰ Iraq Foundation. Strengthening Women's Political Participation Women Running for Elected Office in Iraq: Needs and Challenges.2021. https://iraq.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Executive%20Summary_Women-Political-Participation-Iraq-En.pdf

⁵¹ Al-Ali and Pratt: 131.

punishment.⁵² The Penal Code's provisions are founded on the concept that males possess the power to penalise females, minors, and even young children, with significant repercussions in the event of any form of resistance. The deteriorating political and economic conditions in Iraq have been cited as a rationale for the increasing incidence of offences committed against women and children under the auspices of this legislation.⁵³

According to Mehmet Oglu (2018), there has been a noteworthy involvement of Iraqi women in political decision-making processes since 2003.⁵⁴ In a notable departure from past practice, Iraqi political parties vied for the inclusion of women in the political arena. According to the legislation governing general assembly elections, it is required that female representatives occupy a quarter of the seats in the assembly. Political parties frequently exploit women for propaganda objectives, and the historical impact of the prior single-party structure poses a significant challenge for advocates of democratic principles. Despite the progress made in urbanisation and development, women's involvement in politics remains challenging, as they frequently encounter resistance and must surmount obstacles to promote awareness and assume leadership positions.

Iraqi Women's Struggle for Political Representation

While it is true that women in Iraq have made some progress in political participation since the US invasion in 2003, it is important to acknowledge that they still encounter significant obstacles and challenges within Iraqi society. These challenges hinder their ability to play a more substantial role in the country's political process. In this article, we will highlight some of these obstacles that continue to restrict Iraqi women's political engagement.

- I. Numerous civil society organizations are currently advocating for women's rights in Iraq, aiming to ensure their equitable treatment and significant involvement in social and political spheres. The consideration of feminism within the realm of politics gives rise to a multifaceted intellectual discourse. The discourse has significantly affected the effectiveness and sway of the women's advocacy movement in Iraq. The existence of contradictory relationships between women's organizations that are secular and those that have an Islamic orientation introduces an additional level of intricacy, which **hinders** the formation of authentic unity among civil society institutions. As a result, women's collective challenges and adversities in Iraq have not been the subject of cohesive focus and endorsement.⁵⁵

⁵² Iraq: Penal Code, No. 111 of 1969, July 1969, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/452524304.html>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Mehmet, E. Oglu. (12/05/2018). <https://www.noonpost.com/content/23272>

⁵⁵ Muthana, H. M. Political Participation of Iraqi Women After 2003. (2008):78.

- II. The presence of numerous civil society institutions, each with its distinct perspectives and localized or sector-specific focuses, underscores the differences in their starting points and strategic choices. As a result, efforts to protect women's rights have become scattered, characterized by varying levels of naivety and efficacy. Moreover, a prevalent pattern has emerged where the pursuit of mere survival dominates the agendas and operations of these movements and civil society organizations. This has perpetuated a situation where women rely on their husbands or relatives to determine their involvement in societal institutions, leading to a dearth of inventive approaches capable of exerting meaningful influence on both society and governments. Consequently, the formulation of effective demands that can drive tangible changes within society and garner the attention of government entities has been greatly impoverished (Hassoun, D.T., 12, 17). accessed in Huda (2022).⁵⁶
- III. The responsibility of ensuring that women's issues are given due prominence lies significantly with civil society, particularly in influential decision-making circles. Iraqi women face challenges in their quest for gender equality due to the deeply ingrained patriarchal culture prevalent in Iraqi society. The existing cultural prejudice has a direct impact on the level of involvement of Iraqi women in the public sphere, particularly in the political arena. The manifestation of this phenomenon is apparent through various indicators or observable occurrences that are present in every aspect of the political process.
- IV. Civil society, particularly within influential decision-making circles, heavily relies on the active participation of women as members to ensure that women's issues are placed at the forefront of their agendas. This reliance is necessitated by the unfortunate reality that Iraqi women face systemic biases in their pursuit of equal rights vis-à-vis men within society. These biases find their roots in the deeply ingrained patriarchal nature of Iraqi culture and societal structures. Consequently, the impact of this cultural backdrop becomes evident in the level of involvement of Iraqi women in the public sphere, with a particular focus on their engagement in the political process. This involvement can be discerned through various indicators or observable phenomena that permeate every aspect of the political landscape.

⁵⁶ Huda, H., Mahmoud. Civil society institutions and activating the political role of women in Iraq, "Women's Empowerment Organization as a Model," Journal of Regional Studies. Year 16, Issue. 51. (January 2022).

- V. The active involvement of women as members in decision-making centres is crucial for civil society, particularly in prioritising women's issues and bringing them to the forefront of organizational agendas. The dependence on this approach is justified by the regrettable fact that Iraqi women encounter institutionalised bias when endeavouring to achieve parity in societal rights, in contrast to their male counterparts. The bias can be traced back to the entrenched patriarchal and hierarchical cultural context that typifies Iraqi communities. The cultural context in Iraq has discernible ramifications on the extent of participation of women in the public domain, particularly about their active involvement in the political arena. The extent of involvement can be discerned through diverse indicators or manifestations that span across multiple facets of the political terrain.
- VI. Women in most regions of Iraq experience a state of economic reliance on men. In addition, the additional responsibility of caring for children and fulfilling familial duties imposes a substantial load on women, resulting in their inclination towards submission to male dominance rather than asserting their independence in making choices. As a result, the current scenario has led to the existence of women who are susceptible and depend solely on their restricted level of self-awareness in the realm of politics.
- VII. The societal role of women in Iraq is significantly shaped by the conservative perspectives of religious, sectarian, and tribal authorities. Within this context, numerous political Islamist preachers and the Salafis in Iraq hold the belief that the principles of gender equality, as propagated in European societies, are not obligatory to adhere to. They argue that these principles arise from a society that fundamentally differs from Islamic society. According to Choli (2015), the notion of equality between men and women stands in direct opposition to Islamic law.⁵⁷
- VIII. In southern and central Iraq, the grave issue of honour killings persists, with these acts often not being legally classified as murder. Disturbingly, local women's organizations have reported a concerning rise in the prevalence of such killings. Additionally, a UNICEF survey conducted in 2011 revealed that 43% of women aged 15-49 in Iraq disclosed having undergone female genital mutilation (FGM). While child marriage is prohibited by law, the practice of polygamy is permitted under the condition of strict adherence to Islamic regulations. However, the existence of diverse interpretations of Islamic principles poses challenges in enacting unified legislation and creates room for patriarchal interpretations to prevail.

⁵⁷ Choli, Faiq. Salafism and threat to Kurdistan security. *Rudaw*. (September 6, 2015). From <https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/opinion/06092015>.

- IX. Despite the progress made in terms of women's representation in the parliament and local councils, their presence in executive positions remains significantly limited. Within the current Iraqi government, comprising **twenty-one** ministries, only women head two ministries. These distinguished individuals are Ms. Taif Sami Mohammed, serving as the Minister of Finance, and Ms. Ivan Faeq Yaqoub, holding the position of Minister of Immigration and Displaced Persons.⁵⁸ It is noteworthy that most female representatives rely on securing nominations from male party leaders, which implies that they are bound by their party's stance on women's issues. This reliance on external endorsement hampers their ability to initiate meaningful and substantial changes. Consequently, women often experience a loss of self-confidence and struggle to maintain their identity as opinion leaders and decision-makers in the realm of politics. These challenges persist within the confines of social customs and traditions rooted in rational tribalism and patriarchy, which continue to impose limitations on women's political capabilities. Addressing these limitations is essential in a contemporary context.
- X. The absence of well-established institutions for educating and developing women's abilities has contributed to a situation where women are often limited in their capacities due to societal norms favouring masculine upbringing. Moreover, Iraqi culture has perpetuated a gender bias that places women in subordinate roles to men.
- XI. The Penal Code in Iraq is one of the legislative frameworks that significantly discriminates against women and girls.⁵⁹ For instance, Article 41(1) asserts that "no crime is committed while exercising a lawful right," which includes the allowance for a husband to punish his wife. Article 128 outlines various grounds for reducing or remitting sentences, including committing an offence "with honourable intentions." These provisions assume that men have the right to discipline women and girls who deviate from their prescribed societal roles.⁶⁰ Additionally, societal expectations placed upon women and girls discourage their pursuit of career opportunities, resulting in significant underreporting of gender-based violence (GBV) in Iraq. Furthermore, the limited availability of state-sponsored shelters for GBV survivors, coupled with the need for frequent relocation of NGO-managed shelters to ensure safety, leaves women and

⁵⁸ John, L. New Iraqi Cabinet Approved [full listing]. October 28, 2022. <https://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2022/10/28/new-iraqi-cabinet-approved-full-listing/>

⁵⁹ Iraqi Penal Code, No. 111 of 1969, July 1969, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/452524304.html>.

⁵⁹ Personal Status Law No. 188 of 1959 of 1959, from [5c7664947.pdf \(refworld.org\)](https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c7664947.pdf)

⁶⁰ Iraq: Penal Code. No. 111 of 1969.

girls with nowhere to seek refuge. Survivors of GBV are often encouraged to pursue alternative conflict resolution processes, prioritizing community cohesion and family reputation over the rights of survivors.

- XII. Within the Iraqi legal system, there exist overlaps and ambiguities that contribute to increased discrimination against women and girls. Article 41 of the Constitution affirms the freedom of Iraqis to adhere to their religious, sectarian, or preferential status. The Personal Status Law of Iraq, in Article 7(1), mandates that both parties in a marriage must be at least 18 years old. However, Article 8 of the same law permits the marriage of females as young as 15 with court authorization. The integration of religion into the Iraqi legal system enables conservative organizations to interpret laws in a manner that serves their interests, reinforcing legal discrimination against women and girls with the support of both state and religious authorities.⁶¹
- XIII. In the aftermath of elections, political parties often promote legislation aimed at advancing women's and girls' rights to gain electoral appeal and secure parliamentary and cabinet seats. However, the necessary financial, technical, and human resources for effective implementation are often lacking. This deficiency can be attributed to a combination of limited political will and widespread corruption within the state, resulting in the embezzlement of public funds and the appointment of incompetent individuals to key positions in parliament, the civil service, the police, and the judiciary. Examining the root causes of legal discrimination and patriarchal violence against women and girls in Iraq provides an opportunity to explore potential remedies for strengthening the rule of law in the country.
- XIV. Women's political engagement is undeniably crucial for democracy. However, at times, women themselves hinder their political engagement. Some Iraqi women exhibit greater trust in male politicians to make political decisions, resulting in limited support for fellow women candidates.

FUTURE OF THE IRAQI WOMEN

Despite the presence of commendable legislation aimed at transforming and augmenting women's capabilities and providing sufficient opportunities for their involvement in the political process, the mere existence of these laws is insufficient. Their true impact lies in their effective implementation. To raise awareness regarding gender equality and women's rights and responsibilities, it is imperative to offer favourable platforms through media channels, cultural initiatives, educational institutions, and religious establishments.

⁶¹ Personal Status Law No. 188 of 1959 of 1959, from [5c7664947.pdf \(refworld.org\)](https://www.refworld.org/docid/5c7664947.pdf)

Without a society that comprehends and embraces women's freedoms and rights, it becomes arduous for women to participate in the political process actively.

The crux of the matter does not solely rest on the existence of laws, but rather on the enforcement of these laws, as mentioned earlier. Consequently, it becomes crucial to fortify women's political engagement. Women's involvement in politics yields numerous positive outcomes, including personal growth, betterment of their families, and advancements in their communities. Political, psychological, and socioeconomic factors contribute to the overall political environment. When assessing the measurement framework, key elements to consider include the introduction of the election system in Iraq, electoral data, women's political engagement, and the growth of women's organizations.

Prioritizing critical factors is pivotal in promoting women's empowerment opportunities. Encouragement should be extended towards their active participation in diverse employment prospects. This encompasses educational and training programs, the reduction of criminal and violent acts, ensuring equal rights and opportunities, and eradicating discrimination based on caste, creed, race, religion, sectarianism, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background. However, it is crucial to note that Iraqi women's organizations, at all levels, have yet to evolve into forums for debating and discussing significant gender-related and strategic issues. The presence of support systems within these organizations enables women representatives to effectively address these matters. The advancement of women's empowerment is deemed vital when individuals and groups are dedicated to the progress of their nation. Political engagement stands out as a key strategy in fostering women's empowerment.

The future prospects of women in civil society institutions may undergo experimental changes contingent upon societal developments and the establishment of a democratic culture with its associated practices, particularly in terms of collaborative efforts. When civil society institutions become deeply ingrained within the fabric of their members, society transforms into a dynamic and constructive entity vibrant with democratic values, and this resonance is reflected in the existing authority.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The proposals encompass a wide range of initiatives that aim to enhance women's political engagement and empowerment in Iraq.

- I. Within the political sphere, there is a prevalent belief that women's participation in political, social, cultural, and economic domains not only contributes to their empowerment but also advances the well-being of communities and the nation. Hence, it is imperative to formulate policies that grant Iraqi women access to empowerment opportunities. Inspiring and motivating women becomes crucial in enabling them to attain their goals of political involvement and empowerment.

- II. From an economic standpoint, the government should devise policies that ensure equal employment opportunities for both women and men. This will enable Iraqi women to secure livelihoods independently, freeing them from dependence on male support. Such autonomy will empower women to make their own decisions regarding political engagement, thus positively influencing the development of the democratic process.
- III. Moreover, it is essential for both genders to enhance their understanding and skills through training and educational programs that address the specific needs of women, particularly those belonging to disadvantaged segments of society. Many women aspire to assume rightful positions of authority within the government.
- IV. All institutions, including the state, family, and society at large, must cater to the unique requirements of women. This entails bridging educational disparities, redefining gender roles, and combating biased attitudes.
- V. Political parties should establish educational academies for women, offering comprehensive programs to educate and elevate women before they assume political and leadership roles. Esteemed organizations with expertise in gender issues should develop feminist ideologies and behaviours.
- VI. Legally, while the Iraqi Parliament has enacted several progressive laws to support women's participation in the political process, there is a need to amend laws that impede women's involvement in all spheres of societal development.
- VII. The media has a pivotal role to play in reshaping men's perceptions of women's capabilities and positions. This transformation will contribute to reducing patriarchal power dynamics and challenging negative sectarian biases concerning women's abilities.

CONCLUSION

The proposals encompass a wide range of initiatives aimed at enhancing women's political engagement and empowerment in Iraq. It is crucial to recognize that women cannot be studied in isolation, as they constitute an integral part of society. Considering Iraq's unique historical circumstances, we observe the emergence of women's organizations and their demands for cultural, social, and political rights, despite the prevalent illiteracy and dominant tribal and social culture during the monarchy in Iraq.

The establishment of the republican regime in 1958, following the fall of the monarchy, marked a promising beginning for women's participation in the political process.

Particularly notable was the government under Qassim, where women attained ministerial positions for the first time. However, during the rule of the Ba'ath Party, the real participation of women in political life was limited due to the Ba'athization of society and the dominance of a single-party system. Furthermore, Iraq faced significant challenges including three wars and economic sanctions, which adversely affected women's involvement in the political process. Additionally, the tribal and social realities of Iraq hindered active participation by Iraqi women, resulting in minimal representation during the 1980s.

The fall of the single-party system in 2003 marked a new and promising era for women's participation in the political process. The abolition of the governing council led to the enactment of electoral laws that reserved 25% of seats in the council for women. This set the stage for the future of political participation, with a specific focus on women's involvement.

Iraqi women have made notable strides in participating in the political process. For the first time in Iraqi political history, political blocs compete to include women and place them in leadership positions within institutions. However, it is important to note that political parties often instrumentalize women for propaganda purposes, and advocates for democracy still grapple with the lingering legacy of the totalitarian one-party system.

There has been a significant shift within the women's movement in Iraq, with growing support for women's emancipation. Women are increasingly emerging as political forces at both the national and international levels. Political parties cannot overlook the interests and demands of women, who constitute half of Iraq's population and account for approximately 48.46% of the electorate.

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