

Iraqi Women's Path to Parliament

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Brief Analysis

Reforms are needed to open greater opportunities for Iraqi women's political representation.

In 2020, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), and the Iraq Institute issued a report in which Iraq ranked 70th (<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Joint%20UNAMI%20ESCWA%20IF%20PR%201%20Nov%202020%20EN.pdf>) in the world for female representation in Parliament. Moreover, while women did take on some decision-making positions in the Iraqi government after 2003, women have still not held any truly important presidential or executive positions there.

This lack of female representation in Iraq's public life poses significant challenges to the well-being of women across the country, especially as it limits women's ability to address societal issues that affect them. In Iraq's male-oriented society, it is critical that women receive the political agency necessary to improve their situations. As such, significant reforms and efforts, including pro-women legislation, increased women's participation in party leadership, and active non-governmental advocacy for women's empowerment as public figures, are still necessary to reduce barriers to meaningful, active women's participation in Iraqi government. Accomplishing these goals will require an understanding of the barriers currently facing women who seek to engage meaningfully in public life.

Article 14 of Iraq's 2005 constitution (https://ar.parliament.iq/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A/?_cf_chl_jschl_tk__=ea260f50b6fc890d212b99eabaf04341cd785afd-1622409768-0-AdFNm9G_tIzd7cq30Y-8avE8GjdZizqObQtALFn5N7HJt04XsyOY4RBh1xiZk7bzvmcmk4hglOWDeQRFTYEnkyGtB8d6EaYgYXyzEaEJuo02fHHd67fc_hC9vuBNVt6Aq_1ulhM1De1uCSEMDpnLBHWQV8sdZc0GMivYVAnjGBoBT1tTIHko7BlCrD9yqj5vH5sRt1SmS1qK4r0jKHJrcFL0bE8P1wCsniYf2kHXjzUP8TsONxzbLiSL4PE1bmZS28AJwu_xVn0AXq29l6S6gkEpB8Np7EEqk7PYhYAJ-ZIvulxbGFEEeu9hNvPChYEaGiuVUwW5_Csu0JhIVBXOD_p_MZcdhnD0QOT9yUTnl801SSHRsCUMrQfhHwmjsPKV7j8Zlzni9Y1zmU6pv9NeqFV3X_wgIozMcXx6NvyVVulGNOBP7wtfoqOVuA_L6IvZ5-1Bl08Q2Q) states that "Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, color, religion, sect, belief or opinion, or economic or social status." Nonetheless, the nature of the male-oriented society in Iraq has defined and framed women's public engagement within narrow bounds. Women continue to face challenges that hinder their political participation overall, and their participation in elections and parliamentary life in particular. Currently, even with a gender quota in place, female representation in Parliament does not match the proportion of women in Iraq's population, which is roughly 50%.

To that point, the process of gathering voter support in elections—whether in large, varied provinces or small local districts—is very difficult for women despite the country's gender quota system. As written by the Iraqi legislature, the constitution specifies a minimum of women's representation in the Council of Representatives of no less than 25%. On this basis, the Independent High Electoral Commission (the quota system) was established to protect women and contribute to their parliamentary representation at the lowest levels. However, the quota system and the percentage proposed by the constitution are insufficient measures to create meaningful female representation, given that it would be practically impossible for any woman to win a man's seat outside the quota.

Most electoral districts have a clan or party character, with voters preferring to support men from their clan. As [Faryal al-Kaabi \(https://ronahi.net/?p=53210\)](https://ronahi.net/?p=53210), head of the Awan Organization for Awareness and Capability Development, puts it, "I've realized that the quota, in the concept of our modern state, is nothing more than simple representation of the female sex. Working from this starting point turns the issue into a biological concept, not the social roles of men and women, which are subject to change and social development. Thus, women become a luxury feature to be added to the parliamentary seats, like spices added to politics for flavor."

Moreover, discrimination also extends to female representatives who have already managed to be elected, and this discrimination prevents them from holding public office. For example, some parliamentary committees—such as the Security and Defense Committee—do not include a single woman. In addition, women lack access and representation in the three presidencies—the speaker of parliament, the vice president of the republic, and the deputy prime minister—and they do not represent Iraq in other countries through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

As part of this issue of discrimination, Iraqi political parties have not invested in empowering female politicians or developing their capacity in any real way. There are rare exceptions, such as in the Kurdistan region, where political organizations build up and train female members for success in government management, but there are also parties that use women only as tokens, exploiting their presence in Parliament, robbing them of their agency, and denying them the freedom to make their own decisions on how they vote. In that sense, women often only serve as bodies to fill seats and as votes in the party line, and their chances for self-definition as politicians are low.

In the face of these challenging circumstances, women face almost insurmountable obstacles to meaningful political participation. Female candidates hoping to gain seats outside of the quota must strongly propose their agendas and narratives, crowd out and compete with culturally preferred male candidates in fair competition, and overcome legal obstacles to female participation.

In light of these barriers to female representation, there are several steps that different actors in Iraq should take related to women's leadership in government. To start off, the legislature should add an article to the Parties Law guaranteeing women's share in party leadership at no less than 25% while obligating parties to develop and empower their female cadres through their political platforms and organizational approaches. In addition, civil society organizations, especially those concerned with women's issues, must also work to create training programs designed for women and help develop skills for women already working in the political field.

Furthermore, positive progress on women's participation not only means increasing the number of women in political life, but also changing societal norms and practices that impact women. In this sense, adopting pro-women legislation that would allow women to address issues that particularly concern them, such as domestic violence and discrimination in the workplace, is a must. Iraqi women face blatant discrimination, harassment, and intimidation in the workplace, especially when working in official functions, and women in Iraq still do not receive equal pay for equal work. In order to truly have an impact on women's participation in political processes, those issues must be addressed.

Finally, in order to improve the image of women as professionals, the media must help raise societal awareness of the importance of women's roles in politics and work, highlighting their political, economic, and social potential. In this sense, non-governmental institutions bear a great responsibility in advancing women's political participation. Concerned parties, including

intellectuals, organizations, and the media, must contribute to advancing the Iraq's public thought and value system towards fairness in selection and evaluation.

Thus, these reforms comprise a starting point for the enhancement of female participation in public life. While real barriers will certainly continue to exist, even in the case that these reforms are enacted, it is critical to initiate momentum in this process. Women who are suffering from harassment, domestic abuse, and lack of professional opportunities cannot wait for progress. ❖

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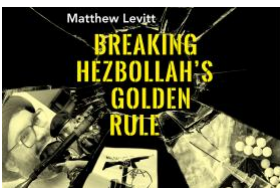
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