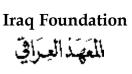Project - First Phase
STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Women Running for Elected Office in Iraq: Needs and Challenges

Executive Summary

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DID YOU KNOW?

In 2020, Iraq ranked seventieth worldwide in the number of women parliamentarians, who occupy **84** of **329** parliamentary seats, equivalent to **25.5** per cent of total seats, compared with **16.6** per cent in the Arab region and **24.9** globally.

DID YOU KNOW?

In 2020, Iraqi women's participation in the Council of Ministers was **9** per cent, equivalent to **2** woman out of **22** ministers.

25%

The year 2003 was a turning point for Iraqi women. The law now stipulates a quota to raise the participation of women in the National Assembly to at least **25** per cent.

Four parliamentary sessions have been held in Iraq following the implementation of the quota law, with the following female representation:

First session 2006-2010: **78 of 275** seats based on quotas, and **21** seats without quotas

Second session 2010-2014: **81 of 325** seats based on quotas, and **15** seats without quotas

Third session 2014-2018: **83 of 329** seats based on quotas, and **20** seats without quotas

Fourth session 2018-2022: **84 of 329** seats, **22** seats without a quota

These results indicate the effectiveness of quotas in increasing women's representation in parliament.

Executive Summary

Introduction

The participation of women in political and electoral processes in Iraq has been hampered by numerous factors, despite Iraqi women's determination to engage in the public sphere. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), the Iraq Foundation and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) conducted research between October 2019 and February 2020 aimed at documenting and understanding the challenges and unmet needs of women who run for elected public office. Five governorates, namely Baghdad, Basra, Ninewa, Najaf and Salah Al Din, were selected for assessment because they offer representative diversity in terms of demographic, social and political environments.

I. Research methodology

The research was guided by the principles of participation, inclusiveness and gender sensitivity. It adopted a mixed-method approach, including the collection and consolidation of qualitative and quantitative data. Secondary resources were reviewed. Individual interviews were conducted with two categories of elected women: members of parliament (MPs) elected in 2018, and members of provincial councils.[1] A total of 32 one-on-one interviews were conducted: nine with women MPs, and 23 with provincial council members.

Five focus group discussions attended by 84 persons, male and female, were held in the five governorates to understand public perceptions of women candidates, attitudes towards women in elected office, and what citizens seek in a credible woman candidate. Participants were drawn from local civil society organizations, community leaders, women's groups, the media, religious leaders and activists.

Lastly, two case studies were conducted with women parliamentarians from Baghdad and Ninewa governorates, who won their seats independent of the quota system. The objective was to gain insight on their successes, and to investigate the mechanisms and strategies they applied.

II. Findings on society's perceptions on political participation

The focus group discussions offered divergent views on women candidates, which can be grouped into five categories along a rough spectrum: women candidates are useless and submissive; external circumstances impede women's performance; society is now more accepting of women's role; women are legitimate candidates; and women candidates play an important role in politics.

Participants also responded to questions about the factors influencing voter choices regarding women candidates. Five different variables were found to affect voter choices for a female candidate, namely her abilities and achievements; her legal and political credentials; her tribal affiliations; her personal qualities; and her physical appearance and femininity. The findings also revealed seven more specific qualities that citizens look for in

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1. When the interviews were conducted, provincial councils were still functional. They were suspended by Parliament in October 2019.

a credible provincial council candidate, namely commitment; balance; communication skills; service to the needy; fulfilment of promises; and strong social affiliations.

Participants were asked to discuss whether the competencies of males and females matched. Responses from participants invoked the limitations placed on women candidates. These limitations were primarily related to socio-cultural constraints, structural bureaucratic constraints, and low involvement in public systems. Socio-cultural constraints facing women are either due to prevailing traditional stereotypes or traditional gendered divisions of labour. Moreover, owing to customary stereotypes, leadership is perceived to be more masculine than feminine.

The findings further highlighted that structural bureaucratic limitations have impacted women's political participation. These include the media's portrayal of women as inadequate and ineffective compared with men. At the governance level, women are often excluded from decision-making in sectors relating to security, conflict-resolution and negotiation with the federal level. Notwithstanding these setbacks, participants opined that women candidates excelled in their qualities and actions. Despite popular perceptions, participants viewed women as being more transparent, credible and efficient in their work compared with men.

III. Experienced and perceived challenges facing female candidates and proposed solutions

Based on the findings of the desk review of international and local literature, the research framework identified several challenges facing women political candidates who run for elected public offices in Iraq. The identified challenges were discussed in the individual interviews conducted with women MPs and provincial

council (PC) members, to assess the importance and level of influence of each challenge and its effect on their political endeavours.

Challenges discussed by both women parliamentarians and PC members fall into the following categories.

A. Political constraints

Iraqi politics is dominated by a small number of major political parties and alliances, often centred on ethnic or religious allegiances and often highly patriarchal. It can be difficult for women candidates to secure positions and support within such groups, and even more difficult to put forward their candidacy under an independent banner. Women also do not usually have access to financing, which is fundamental to attracting political supporters in Iraq. In some instances, women candidates are simply reluctant to run for elections in a political system based on patronage.

B. Socio-cultural constraints

Patriarchal traditions stemming from a tribal culture discriminate against women and reject their leadership. This discrimination is incorporated into, and replicated in, the political system. Consequently, political life is conducted in accordance with male norms and values. Candidates for elections are often selected by political parties for their tribal affiliations – a system which favours men. In some cases, potential women candidates are required to seek the approval of extended family to run for elected office, and their candidacy/subsequent assumption of a political role (including the positions they take on certain issues) can be seen as having a negative social effect on their immediate family.

C. Structural and bureaucratic barriers

Constraints highlighted by women MPs and PC members include that women rarely secure the sort of prominent positions in State institutions or structures (such as the judiciary or senior

civil service) that offer a starting point or leverage to make the jump into politics.

D. Financial and economic constraints

Women candidates face financial challenges in funding their political campaigns. Political parties, which provide financial support to their candidates, allocate the bulk of funds to male candidates. This lack of campaign budget limits access to political networks, media platforms and constituents. Separately, women candidates (more than male ones) may need to provide some form of protection to their families while they campaign; a prohibitive safety cost can make their candidacy impossible.

E. Violence during elections

Violence against women in politics was a serious problem in the 2018 national elections. Women candidates faced violence that varied between governorates and that differed in prevalence, type and source. Examples shared by women MPs and PC members include intimidation and bullying, threats by and to family members, social and political accusations damaging to reputations, and terrorism-related threats in governorates previously under Islamic State control.

F. Lack of preparation and training

Mainly affecting potential new candidates, a lack of political awareness or exposure, or the chance to build the skills needed to navigate public affairs, were cited as limiting the opportunities (or the confidence) for women to gain leadership positions.

IV. Lessons learned and successful strategies and tools offered as advice from experienced female candidates

Notwithstanding the barriers hindering women's full and equal participation in elected public life, the experiences of two successful women parliamentarians, Mahasin Hamdoun Hamed (Ninewa Governorate) and Majda Al-Tamimi (Baghdad Governorate), who won seats outside the 25 per cent constitutional quota, offer important and constructive lessons for potential women candidates.

Advice shared by the two MPs include the importance of being motivated by service to the community rather than the material gains that come with political positions; the importance of having a fact-based, detailed and well-designed action plan for the nomination phase and a clear understanding of the priorities of voters; and the need for patience and wisdom to navigate the often-difficult waters of politics, not least to help combat defamation and bullying.

Additional testimonies from other women MPs and PC members describe other factors contributing to success in elections, such as prior community service; previous political exposure in leadership positions; support from family, relatives and friends; political awareness and training; and qualities such as honesty when interacting with voters.

V. Support for women candidates

The findings of the desk review of women MPs show that there is a substantive need for capacity-building in areas where women should improve and enrich their skills. These include interpersonal skills, political knowledge, communication skills, and campaign management and support mechanisms. The highest priority was judged to be communication skills, whether in debate, negotiation or interaction with the public. Addressing these needs was seen to assist in countering the stereotypes around women in politics at both the provincial council and federal levels, and promote the credibility of women candidates in the public arena, thus enabling a shift in public perceptions of female politicians.

Strategies that were seen as priorities to promote women's candidacy and participation at the parliamentary level entail strengthening women's positions within political party structures, including among the party leadership; establishing a forum/body for women parliamentarians; expanding and consolidating efforts between United Nations agencies to support female political actors. Several parliamentarians also raised the following issues: the provision of financial support to facilitate entry into the electoral process; the promotion of public awareness to portray women positively; assistance to women candidates on their media strategies; and the need for solidarity and moral support.

VI. Recommendations to promote women's participation and representation in elected public life

A. Recommendations to the Government of Iraq

- Develop a comprehensive strategy for the advancement of women in public life that emphasizes support for, and promotion of, a culture of equality, non-discrimination and non-violence in line with Iraqi commitments to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women ;

- Commit to and implement measures, in collaboration with law enforcement and the judiciary, to hold legally accountable those who promote hate speech and acts of political violence against women;

- Promote a gender-sensitive culture at all levels and in all State institutions to ensure that social and economic policies do not perpetuate deeply rooted negative stereotypes about women's capabilities,

but rather ensure the promotion of their full participation in public life, socially and economically;

- Encourage academic study, in collaboration with academia, including research into women's political participation to inform policy work on advancing women's participation in public life.

B. Recommendations to political parties

- Examine party structures and procedures to remove barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against women's participation, including in leadership positions;

- Place women's issues high on the agenda when deliberating legislation or overseeing government performance.

C. Recommendations to civil society organizations

- Deliver nationwide awareness-raising campaigns, in collaboration with the media, which promote women's political participation and its added economic and social value;

- Mobilize the media in establishing guidelines to ensure fair coverage of women's political rights and the campaigns of female candidates for political office, and to combat hate speech and negative stereotypes of female political actors in the media;

- Provide capacity-building programmes for women candidates (and potential future candidates), so that they acquire knowledge, information and skills that will help establish/ reinforce their political credibility;

- Empower women by building their self-confidence and encourage them to participate in national and regional decision-making processes by running for political office.